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WARRIORS OF OTHER WORLDS

By MORRIS J. STEELE

Uranus, a giant world of eternal cold, is perhaps the most savage world in all the solar system. A warrior of this planet would be equally savage . . .

(See Cover.)

ALTHOUGH science knows very little about the planet Uranus from which we can deduce what a fighting man of that planet might be like, we can construct a fairly logical image.

First, he is huge. Uranus has a mass 14.7 times as great as that of Earth. A man of Earth, placed on Uranus, would weigh approximately 2540 pounds (assuming the Earthman to weigh 170 pounds on Earth). The man of Uranus, bulking twice as large as the Earthman, would possibly weigh as much as $2\frac{1}{2}$ tons. Obviously, therefore, he must be very strong. He could pick up an ordinary anti-tank gun and hurl it a hundred feet away.

Next, he wears no clothes, but is protected from the intense cold of his world by a heavy coat of fur which makes him very shaggy in appearance. Uranus lies 19.19 times the distance of Earth from the sun from the sun. Thus it gets very little heat from that body. An Earthman, going to Uranus to battle this warrior, would require equipment and clothing to combat the cold. The Uranian would possess a flowing moustache to protect his lips and nostrils from the cold. The Earthman would require a space helmet. The Uranian would also possess a wind-breaking formation of hair on his head and about his ears which would allow him to hear, but keep out the direct blasts of the icy wind.

The eyes of our Uranian warrior are slitted like the cat's. The reason for this is Uranus' distance from the sun. The solar orb would appear only as a point of light, but one of such dazzling brilliancy that its illuminating power would be as great as that of 3000 full moons seen from the Earth. Atmospheric clouds might cut this down further, and the Uranian would need eyes accustomed to seeing in an almost perpetually gloomy half-night. They would possess great powers of pupil expansion and contraction to gather in all available light or to exclude it when too brilliant.

The density of Uranus is less than one fourth that of Earth, or 1.27 times that of water. Thus, the warrior of Uranus would find that most of his world was water, with little land area. But because of the extreme cold, much of this water would be perpetual ice, and huge continents of ice might exist which never melt.

He would be equipped with large splay feet

to enable him to walk on deep snow, which would be packed to ice by the tremendous weight of his body. If he hadn't such feet, he would sink to his hips at every step, and would be helpless.

However, he would be more agile than an invading Earthman, no matter what his own agility, because of the impossibility of an Earthman to move about under a weight of more than a ton.

Thus, it is a foregone conclusion that the Earthman is equipped with some scientific gadget which counteracts gravity, and lightens him so that he can move about on this giant world. If he possessed no such apparatus, he would not dare venture onto this world. The very weight of his body would suffocate him.

The Uranian would possess the most powerful set of lungs in the whole solar system, because of the tremendous weight of the atmosphere that surrounds his world. Uranus is mostly a gaseous world, and the effect would be that of living at the bottom of a deep lake, and breathing water. With this dense atmosphere, the Uranian possesses a lung development which is greatly more muscular and constructed on entirely different principles than that of Earthmen.

Intelligence would be of a minor nature, and this warrior would possess no super-scientific weapons. Our Earthmen invaders, armed with ray guns, would find him fairly easy prey, armed as he is with only stones and clubs, or his bare fists, or perhaps a crude stone knife. However, because of the bestial nervous system, he might be very dangerous to face because of the real problem of killing him short of blasting him with high explosives. He would undoubtedly keep on coming under terrific punishment for an almost unbelievable period of time.

Therefore, it is not wise to allow this fighter to come to close quarters, because a detachment of scientifically armed Earthmen might easily be smashed even by the death throes of a savage monster who has had little time to realize that he should, by Earthian standards, be dead!

It is possible, too, that the Uranian would have no heart, and no circulatory system as we know it. It would be impractical on this giant planet. He might have a series of hearts working in unison, just as batteries are connected in series. Thus, striking one heart would not be necessarily instantly fatal. This Uranian fighter is a tough, dangerous customer!

RIDDLES OF SCIENCE

The Mystery of the MAYA



The MAYA CALENDAR DATES ITSELF FROM THE YEAR 3373 B.C. WHICH PLACES THEIR BEGINNING MORE THAN 53 CENTURIES AGO. PRIOR TO THAT TIME, WE HAVE NO HINT OF THEIR ORIGIN. VARIOUS AUTHORITIES TEND TOWARD LEMURIA, ATLANTIS AND ANCIENT NORSE ADVENTURERS . . .



THE MAYA SETTLED IN GUATEMALA AND HONDURAS, TIKAL BEING THE LARGEST CITY OF THE OLD EMPIRE. BETWEEN 530 A.D. AND 629 A.D. THIS EMPIRE WAS MYSTERIOUSLY ABANDONED, AND A NEW EMPIRE FOUNDED IN YUCATAN, WITH CHICHEN ITZA ITS GREATEST CITY.

Why WAS THE MAGNIFICENT OLD EMPIRE DESERTED? BECAUSE OF A PLAGUE? AN EARTHQUAKE? OR WAS THE SOIL TOO POOR TO SUPPORT THE GREAT POPULATIONS OF THE CITIES?

BUT EVEN THE NEW EMPIRE WAS DOOMED. THE SPANISH CONQUERORS RUTHLESSLY DESTROYED IT. TODAY SCIENCE STRUGGLES WITH MEANINGLESS HIEROGLYPHS, LOST LANGUAGES, TO READ THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF A GREAT ANCIENT EMPIRE.

WE owe our lack of knowledge of the Maya to the bigotry of one man, Landa, Bishop of Yucatan. After the Spanish conquest, he burned all Maya records with the exception of three astronomical codex. We do know, however, that the Maya were the finest astronomers of history, their calendar accurately covering 53 centuries without error. They were not a scientific race otherwise, being good agriculturists and architects, but not good mechanics. They were a great race, living simply and happily in peace. Today scientific excavation is progressing rapidly, and we may yet solve the mystery of the Maya.

WARRIORS *of* MARS

By
**ARTHUR
TOFTE**

Ansel Sellery was a mild scientist,
then suddenly he became a fighting
fiend. But only loyal Tolobo knew
how it affected the fate of a world





CHAPTER I Tolobo's Fear

"TEN thousand feet up, and we are falling as easy as a parachute," said Ansel Sellery as he turned and smiled broadly at Tolobo, his companion. The scientist's lean, weather-beaten face showed the joy he felt. At last, man had beaten space, and he, Ansel Sellery, was that man.

Tolobo's black eyes flashed with a deep fear and his ebony skin glistened with sweat though it was very cold in the space ship.

"I do not like this Mars," Tolobo

said simply. "We should go back . . . not land. It is bad here. I feel it."

"Yes, yes, Tolobo, I know how you feel," Sellery smiled wryly. "I feel kind of queer myself. Think of it—in a few minutes more, two men from Earth will step out on the soil of Mars!"

"I do not like it," Tolobo muttered.

The young scientist looked sharply at his companion and friend.

"You're not going to lose your nerve now, are you?" he asked. "We've been through too much together to lose courage at this stage of the game."

Then Sellery laughed.

"Remember that day I first saw you—you, in your fine feathers as chief of your people on the Congo! And how surprised I was when you spoke to me in English . . . said you had been to Oxford! And later that day when we attacked your enemy—that other tribe up the river—you weren't afraid then."

"I'm not afraid," Tolobo replied. Then he shook his black head. "I feel it is bad here on this place . . . bad like a lion carcass full of maggots. I can smell it."

"Nonsense," cried Sellery. But nevertheless he took another look at the huge black man who had been his companion for years on scientific adventures that had taken them all over Earth and now to Mars.

"We're going to land any moment now," Sellery said. "Be ready with the space suits. Too bad this crate hasn't windows in it so we can see where we are."

A moment later, the space ship, its forward jets holding it in almost perfect suspension, settled lazily to an even keel.

Ansel Sellery let out a whoop of triumph and at once clambered into the space suit Tolobo held for him. The black man's eyes were pin points of fear, but his hands were as steady as ever.

"Take a frequency gun* if you think we may need it," Sellery said as he headed toward the air lock chamber.

Quickly the scientist turned the series of wheels that opened the air lock. The two men stepped in. Another series of wheels were turned and the small circular door in the outer shell opened. Sellery clambered out

first and stood erect. Tolobo followed.

Side by side, the two men in their clumsy space suits stood and looked out over the desolate white plain that surrounded them. As far as they could see, nothing moved, nothing broke the monotonous levelness of the scene. Overhead a shining, colorless sky was cloudless. Underneath their feet the whiteness seemed like a layer of thin snow, or more like a heavy frost.

The scientist moved one foot across the ground and saw that a yellow-gray moss stuck to his foot. Scraping the frost away from a larger patch, he saw that the moss was quite heavy and thick and was fully an inch through to the yellow sandy soil below.

Despite the heavy suits they were wearing, there was a certain buoyant lightness to their stride as they walked around the space ship to look at what lay in the other direction.

Just as they reached the tail of the ship, and were about to step around it, Tolobo suddenly seized Sellery's arm and pulled him back.

"Something very bad on other side," Tolobo said through the two-way speaking device they had in their helmets.

But Sellery was not to be stopped now. With a wrench of his arm, he threw himself bodily ahead, the force of his earth-muscles sending him clear beyond the end of the space ship.

And in the instant that he looked up, his blood froze in horror!

There—standing immobile a few score yards away like an army awaiting the sound of a trumpet to charge, were thousands and thousands of bronze-colored Martian warriors.

EIGHT and nine foot giants they were, with long legs and comparatively small torsos from which two long arms extended. A third, much

* The frequency gun operates on the principle of extremely rapid vibrations produced by two magnetic discs. The result of a beam of vibration at 800,000 per second is similar to great heat—whatever is in its path is burned without smoke or a great deal of ash.—Ed.

shorter arm stuck out from the middle of the chest, and was obviously used for holding the shields the men carried before them. In their two side hands they carried twin swords—almost as long as the men themselves.

Sellery gulped at the sight. Then he raised his right arm in the universal gesture of friendliness. Still no response and no motion from the warriors standing silently before him.

"Let us get back in the space ship," Tolobo pleaded. "These Martians mean to kill us."

"How do you know?" Sellery asked unwilling to retreat.

"I know," Tolobo said. "I feel. I can feel their thoughts. They mean to kill us."

Sellery looked at his friend. Perhaps he did know. Time and again, in diverse adventures, Tolobo's intuition, or what he called his "feeling," had saved them from disaster. Tolobo had often proved to him that he could get telepathic messages over great distances. Perhaps these Martians did mean to kill them. But why did they stand there so quietly?

Then he noticed them begin to shift nervously from foot to foot. He saw some of them look backwards. Their expressions, which were human-like in features, began to take on a most malevolent look. The slit eyes narrowed still more. The wide, down-curving mouths became grimaces of hate. The long full noses, almost too big for their faces, twitched convulsively. And the twin swords of the men in front began to move restlessly in their hands.

Suddenly the restlessness stopped, and a rift was made in the army. Straight as a highway, a path was opened, and down this path came quickly one being. The warriors all turned and saluted by bowing as the figure passed along the clearing.

Tolobo seized Sellery by the arm and cried desperately.

"Come quickly before it is too late! Do not wait!"

But the scientist stood rooted to the spot. For he could see the being coming closer and closer. His eyes were on it. He could not leave.

Then—the creature was there, stepping lightly from between the ranks of the soldiery. And Sellery stared—

For never in all his life had he seen such a perfect feminine being. Here, before him, was the ultimate woman!

Tall she was—taller by half a head than Sellery himself. Her long legs and short body were covered by a thin gossamer of revealing metallic cloth. The features of face and body that on the soldiers looked gross and horrible, on her looked chiseled and fine. The bronze of her skin was more copper colored, softer. Her shimmering hair hung to her waist like a great cape of gold. Not earthly, as a human woman of Earth would be, this creature magically overpowered his senses with her utter beauty, her feminine magnetism.

For a long moment she looked at the two strangers. Then, without a movement from her, two of the warriors stepped from the ranks and advanced toward the Earthmen, their twin swords swinging in long, curving arcs.

"She told those two soldiers to kill us," Tolobo cried desperately to Sellery as he attempted again to pull the scientist back to the space ship. He pleaded—

"I heard her call them her Trologs. I can read their thoughts, and they think only of fighting and of hate," the black man was saying. "In another minute it will be too late. These Trologs are not humans . . . they are fiends!"

Slowly Sellery nodded, the smile never leaving his face. Then he

reached for the frequency gun in Tolobo's hands.

CHAPTER II

The Canal City

THE two Martian warriors advanced, swinging their seven-foot swords in great circles about them. When they were still some twenty feet away, Sellery lifted the gun and gave them a light blast. The soldiers halted, the fighting look on their brutish faces changing to amazed surprise. Then they sank to the ground, their long swords falling beside them. The men writhed in agony for a moment or two and then were still.

Without hesitation, two more soldiers stepped from the ranks and came toward the two Earthmen. Again Sellery gave them light blasts that sent them to the ground helpless, but did not burn them to cinders as he could have done.

Sellery looked at the woman. The expression on her beautiful face had not changed in the slightest. He was almost afraid to gaze at her, her beauty was so intensely penetrating to his senses.

Through their helmet communication system, Tolobo again was urging him to return to the ship.

"I beg you," he cried, "while there is still a chance, let us go."

Sellery's eyes never left those of the Martian woman.

"Tell her with your telepathy, if you can," the scientist instructed his black companion, "that we are from the planet Earth, that we wish to be friends."

Tolobo shrugged his shoulders in resigned defeat and turned to face the woman of Mars. For a few minutes he stood motionless, his black eyes fixed on her. Then he turned to Sellery.

"I think she understands me. When I think in thoughts instead of words, I am sure she knows what I mean. And I know what she means."

"What is she thinking?" Sellery asked.

"She wants us to follow her!" Tolobo replied sadly, knowing that was exactly what the scientist wanted to do.

At these words as though realizing fully what had been said between the two Earthmen, the Martian woman turned and went back along the open path among the Trolog soldiery. The path remained open.

"I am going to follow her," Sellery said, and looked at his black friend.

"I go where you go," was the other's reply.

Down the open rift between the soldiers they walked, their buoyancy letting them take strides six and eight feet long. Behind them the Trologs closed up the path.

For nearly an hour the two Earthmen strode along behind the Martian woman. Then suddenly she disappeared.

When they came to the end of the path they saw before them a river of blue water. Straight as a string it stretched in each direction, and about two miles across. But at their feet was a cave-like opening. Soldiers stood about the opening, and it was obvious that it was meant for them to enter.

Reaching into his kit bag for the small, high-powered flashlight he carried, Sellery motioned for Tolobo to come with him. Both noticed with some surprise that none of the Trologs followed them into the opening.

For another half-hour, the Earthman followed the course of the tunnel as it went steadily and unswerving downward at about a fifteen per cent grade. At last they saw a light ahead, and the tall, slender figure of the Martian

woman as she passed into the light.

At sight of her again, Sellery's heart beat faster. There were strange, subtle emotions stirred up in him, emotions that he could not analyze as he thought of her ravishing beauty. Already he realized he was under a spell that made escape seem unimportant.

Leaving the tunnel, they came out into a completely empty but well-lighted cavernous room, roughly about seventy or eighty feet square. Its only feature was a circular hole in the middle of the floor.

Sellery played his flashlight into the hole and saw that it was only about ten feet deep. Without even looking back at Tolobo to see if he were following, the scientist leaped lightly down.

At once arms seized him! In the clumsy space suit, he felt himself tightly pinioned without a chance to defend himself. And before he could warn Tolobo the other too was seized as soon as he dropped into the hole.

THE flashlight had fallen and gone out in the short struggle, leaving the Earthmen with nothing but their sense of feeling to tell what was happening. They felt themselves lifted and placed horizontal in a tube-like cylinder. Then, for some time, they felt only the sensation of moving and finally stopping.

When the tube was opened they were in another empty room, much like the one at the end of the tunnel they had first entered.

"Are you still hearing the message of the Martian woman?" Sellery asked Tolobo.

"Yes, she is just ahead. She tells us to walk through that doorway there and we will see her again."

Together the two men cautiously approached the door—a strange circular door which showed itself at least six feet thick when it opened quietly at

their approach. The two men walked through.

A strange sight met their startled eyes. After the grim empty harshness of the rooms they had seen previously, they were hardly prepared for the rich tapestries, gorgeous in flaming colors, that hung on the walls. The floor seemed to be of some patterned material as soft under their feet as sponge rubber. Light in various colors shone on the high-vaulted ceiling—though where the lights were located, they could not see.

And at the end of the seventy-foot room, the Martian woman lay waiting for them on a pile of long-haired white furs. She had changed to a robe of brilliant green, and if anything, she looked more overpowering in her loveliness than before.

She made no move to rise. She did not even look up at the two Earthmen as they approached. Instead, she began to stroke her long golden hair.

"Ask her who she is and where we are on the planet?" Sellery nudged his friend.

"She says she is The Woman, whatever she means by that," Tolobo replied after several minutes of silence. "And she says we are in a Canal city. She gives me some kind of a thought that I suppose is the name of the city, but I can't make it out. It is something like Seventy Three—at least that's the way it keeps coming to my mind. These people probably have a number of cities and give them numbers instead of names."

"Ask her if she will show us the city," suggested Sellery.

Tolobo turned, and hardly before his thought waves could be brought to bear on the question, the Martian woman leaped to her feet and led them to another circular door. Quickly they followed through after her.

The city that suddenly lay at their feet was clouded with a fine mist. But through the thin fog they could see rows of variously shaped buildings, yet orderly and frequently uniform in shape. They could see swiftly moving wingless cars flying through the air with astonishing speed, following the tenuous lines of silver-like wires stretching in a network in all directions. But strangest of all was the great circular sky dome that stretched overhead and as far toward the horizon as the eye could see through the mist.

The building from which they stared out over the fog-filled scene was by far the tallest in sight, and apparently was the hub of the city, for wide streets stretched out like spokes in all directions from it.

WHEN Sellery could catch his breath, he turned to Tolobo.

"Don't you see? These are ancient peoples. Older than Earthmen. Through all the ages, as Mars has cooled, they have built themselves these covered cities, as there are probably many more. It keeps out the cold, and keeps in the warmth. I wouldn't be surprised if there was enough air here too, for us. I'm going to take a try."

Quickly Sellery unscrewed his helmet and took it off. Into his lungs he drew great breaths of air. It was warm and as sweet as mountain air on Earth. He nodded to Tolobo, and a few minutes later, the two Earthmen were standing clear of their awkward space suits, dressed in the ordinary clothes of their native planet.

"Tell her that we would like to see the city at close range," Sellery said to Tolobo.

"She says first we eat," Tolobo replied, wearing a smile for the first time since they had landed.

Back in the Martian woman's room,

the two men sprawled out at her feet on the soft white furs. Almost immediately, several small, gnomelike creatures entered, bearing trays of strange-looking foods.

Hardly human in appearance, the beings stood no more than four feet high. Their heads and especially the flapping ears were far too big for their bodies. Their eyes were dim and lustreless, and their skin was a sallow yellow. They hunched over awkwardly as they ran in, their four long, thin arms holding the trays in front of them.

"She calls them Grappies," Tolobo whispered to Sellery.

Before the golden-haired woman, they placed one tray. Before Sellery they placed another just like it. But before Tolobo they placed a different type of tray and on it were foods that were not like that on the other two trays.

"Strange tasting," Sellery remarked as he bit into a large, luscious pear-like fruit, blue in color. "But very delicious—a Martian delight! How's that food of yours?"

Tolobo looked up and grinned. "Tastes like raw potato . . . but it fills the belly."

When they had finished, Sellery spoke to Tolobo. "Find out her name if you can."

"Her name is Azara. She told me that the first thing."

"And you didn't tell me?"

Sellery looked at his companion. "Still afraid of her?"

Tolobo looked down, unable to meet the scientist's gaze.

"Azara is a fiend," he said quietly. "She is but playing with us. Soon she will stop playing. And that will be our end."

The scientist looked at the beautiful girl who lay gracefully on the furs near him. He smiled. At once her face

lighted up in the most heart-stirring smile he had ever seen. It thrilled him as nothing in his life had ever thrilled him. He wanted to throw himself at her feet. It almost seemed like a madness had come over him as he looked at her. It was only Tolobo's tug at his arm that brought him back to sanity in time.

"Remember," Tolobo whispered, "you are Ansel Sellery, Earthman. This woman is not for you."

The scientist rubbed vigorous knuckles into his eyes trying to erase the unholy power the girl seemed to have over him. He jumped to his feet and strode to the door.

"Tell her we would like to see the city now—on close view."

A FEW minutes later the three were seated in one of the air cars, suspended from a silver-like wire by two more glistening threads. Without any apparent motive power and operated by a simple lever in the front, the car swished through the air, following the slender thread of wire through the mist.

When they stopped they were on a wide boulevard. Trologs, four and five abreast, walked along boisterously as young soldiers are accustomed to do on the boulevards of Earth. Sometimes, as any of the Grappies got in their way, one of the soldiers would whip out his sword and take a few whistling slashes with it under their legs.

For half a mile the three walked along the street. Always when the Trologs saw Azara they halted, bowed low to her. The dwarf-men merely cringed back out of sight when she passed.

Once they passed what appeared to be a factory. The place was filled with Grappies sitting at long benches, working at various jobs. Back of them, at regular intervals, stood Trologs armed with swords and long whips.

Another time they passed a building that was completely transparent. Soldiers were sleeping on piles of furs in the corners of the rooms. A few stood guard. In other rooms, gnome-men were preparing and cooking foods.

"Have you noticed something extremely strange?" Sellery asked his black friend.

The other nodded. "Yes . . . there are no women!"

"Exactly," the scientist agreed. "That must mean that Azara here is the only woman in all the city. If that is true, it means that Martians have developed like bees on Earth—with a single female as queen to rule and be mother for the whole nation! And they are probably spawned from eggs. No wonder she has such powerful feminine appeal! No wonder the soldiers all bow to her!"

The two Earthmen looked at each in wonder at this strange, almost unbelievable thought.

A few minutes later, they noticed that the soldiers they had passed were following them. Behind them were now thousands of the brutish-looking Martian warriors, quietly following at a respectful distance.

When the three came to a large circular building, Azara entered, the Earthmen following. It was a meeting place, they realized, with an arena surrounded by rows of seats.

The three walked across the arena to a central raised place, covered with piles of soft rugs and surrounded by a barricade of sharp pickets. The girl sank down on the furs; Sellery and Tolobo sat down a little warily beside her.

Soon the rows of seats were filled with Trologs and the doors at the two sides of the arena opened.

From one door six armed warriors marched out and faced six warriors from the other door. Then they turned

and bowed to Azara.

In the next instant, swords were out, and pairing off, the warriors began the most bloody duels the Earthmen had ever seen. As soon as one warrior fell, his body literally hacked to pieces by his opponent's twin swords, his victorious opponent would step back until another fighter was free to face him.

Finally only two fighters were left—splendid physical specimens. They were tall and as agile as antelope in their leaping to avoid blows or to deliver them. Their swords flashed through the air like streaks of lightning, keeping a horrible cadence of death.

There was a sudden hesitation in the smooth flow of movement of one of the warriors. The next instant his neck was pierced and he fell writhing in death agony.

Not a sound came from the onlookers or from Azara. She turned and looked at Sellery.

Tolobo let out a gasp of horror and seized the scientist's arm.

"I know now," he cried. "These men are fighting for the honor of being her mate! And now she wants you to go into the arena and fight the victorious Trolog warrior!"

Slowly, as though hardly knowing what he was doing, Sellery got to his feet, walked to the fence, let himself through the gate and faced the nine-foot Martian fighter.

CHAPTER III

The War Game

AS Ansel Sellery stepped out into the corpse strewn arena, there was something light-hearted and gay within him . . . a soaring of spirit as though fighting for one's life was a joy beyond any other pleasure.

He thought of a football game long

ago—the first one he had ever played. How scared he had been of the thousands of eyes looking down at him! How his knees had knocked together! How frightened he had been!

Strangely, it wasn't at all like that now. He wasn't frightened, and his knees didn't knock together. Even when he looked into the Martian's fighter's blazing eyes and knew that he had to battle for his life, he felt no fear.

His memory went back to that football game and how, frightened as he was, he had thrown a forward pass that had won the game.

The thought made him smile as it gave him an idea. It told him how to fight this warrior. In his belt was an automatic super-fire revolver . . . but he'd fight this warrior in a different way.

Still smiling, Sellery stopped beside one of the fallen fighters and picked up his two swords. Beautifully turned they were, and despite their length, better balanced than he had imagined.

Swinging them tentatively once around his head, he found them long and unwieldy, but just right for the way he wanted to use them. He headed toward his opponent.

A great hideous grin covered the brutish face of the Martian as he approached swinging his twin swords about him, and holding his small shield before him by his stubby third arm.

When the Martian was about three sword lengths away, Sellery suddenly lifted the sword in his left hand and holding it as he would a spear, threw it deliberately at the Trolog warrior's long legs. The shield came down to meet it. And in that same instant, Sellery threw the other sword with his right arm.

There was feeling of utter joy rose up in him as he saw the sword fly straight for the soldier's throat, through it, and almost a full length beyond.

He looked up at the Trologs on the

seats in the balcony. Their expressions had not changed. He turned and looked at Azara. She was smiling, and something told him that she was pleased.

Just then he heard a shout of warning. It was Tolobo, now on his feet and pointing at the open doorway at the end of the arena.

Through it was crawling the most loathsome beast that Sellery had ever seen or imagined. It was like a giant beetle with scores of long, tenuous octopus-like tentacles for legs, and a red shiny shell body that was fully thirty feet in length.

At the ends of the upper tentacles were huge nipper-like claws, and as the animal came across the arena, it stopped at the first of the fallen bodies. One tentacle turned the body over, another came sliding along beside it, two more ripped the metallic clothing from the man, and in an instant, the naked nine-foot giant warrior was snapped up and thrust into the huge undermaw of the beast.

Then it caught sight of Sellery standing alone in the middle of the arena. Sellery looked over at Azara and smiled. She smiled back.

FOR only a moment the huge creature hesitated. Then, with a hissing sound like a steam boiler gone mad, it charged. With incredible speed, on its several score of legs it raced toward Sellery.

Deliberately he drew his automatic, aimed, and fired. One shot after another, as fast as the mechanism could work, he pumped steel bullets into the charging beast. He knew he was hitting it every time . . . but on it came!

There was no chance now to run or dodge . . . it was suddenly on him! And just as he fell beneath the animal, he felt and saw a huge searing flame that barely missed him. And in that instant,

what had been a juggernaut of horror riding down on him was now a puff of smoke, a horrible stench in the air!

Sellery rubbed his eyes doubtfully, then looked over at the central section where Tolobo was carefully slipping the frequency gun back under his jacket. Just in time, Tolobo had blasted the beast.

Still smiling, though his legs felt a bit wobbly, Sellery went back toward Azara and Tolobo.

The woman greeted him, as was becoming her regular custom, with merely a smile. Tolobo's ebony skin shone with perspiration and his black eyes were wild with fear.

Sellery patted his friend on the back.

"Just in time, as usual, Tolobo. You know, I enjoyed that. I wonder what's next on the program?"

Tolobo pointed toward Azara.

"She wants you for her mate," he said hoarsely and looked down as though ashamed to have said the words.

Sellery felt another surge of joy go through him — a strange, unnatural fever of desire. He turned toward her. . . .

But Azara had already left the center section and was walking across the arena. Sellery hurried after her, with Tolobo close by his heels.

Down the boulevards they went, and finally the three were in the car that was to take them to Azara's palace.

At the landing platform, Azara paused for a moment and looked at Tolobo.

The big black man flinched and then spoke to the scientist.

"She says you are to go with her, and I am to have separate quarters with the Grappies."

Sellery nodded.

"Do as she says, Tolobo. She is ruler here."

And as he turned and followed the

Martian woman into her palace.

IN the days that followed, Sellery spent most of the time at Azara's feet on the white furs, merely looking up into her face. As a scientist, this face of hers interested him strangely. And as a man, he felt that here was all the loveliness and beauty of all woman-kind embodied in one woman.

And when meal times came, he ate more of the strange blue Martian fruit. It was far more delicious than anything he had ever eaten on Earth.

After about two weeks, he felt queer things happening to him. For one thing, he began to understand what Azara was thinking, and he could transmit simple thoughts of his own to her. At first it was hard to believe, but a series of tests proved to him that telepathic communication had been definitely established between them.

He wondered if it were due to her tremendous powers of telepathy that she had managed to break through his Earth-bound five senses? Or perhaps the Martian air he breathed . . . or even this strange fruit he ate with such relish—perhaps one of these was the cause.

At any rate, their communication became more frequent and more complex. One day when he expressed, in thoughts, his desire to see more of the planet, Azara stood up from the furs, and led him out to the landing platform of her aerial car.

At once, in the highways that stretched out in every direction from the palace, soldiers began to gather as if by Azara's telepathic command. Soon there were thousands of them marching in close array toward the palace on each of the streets. Sellery marveled at the tremendous display of military man-power.

He noticed, as he got into Azara's

car, that it was equipped with considerable war trappings—armor for Azara, swords, and his own space suit which the Martians probably mistook as armor for him.

With Sellery in her car with her, Azara flew speedily over the heads of the Trolog soldiers through the mist-filled air. A half dozen miles or so from the palace they came to the edge of the city's dome. Quickly Azara leaped from the car, slipped into her armor and strode to a huge metal circular doorway. It opened at her approach.

Beyond the door was a large empty room, and through and beyond the room was another circular door, through which the two passed.

Sellery stood up and looked at the bright open sky. The sharp, dry, cold air struck his nostrils keenly, but it felt good to him after the humid heat under the city's dome. He followed Azara.

But after a couple hundred feet the scientist felt that something was wrong. It wasn't merely the cold, but his lungs! He wasn't getting enough air into them. And his heart was beating too fast and too hard.

Suddenly he realized—the air was too thin for him!

HIS legs were like lead; his head buzzed with a deafening roar. Just in time, he managed to get back to the circular door at the dome's edge. With his last bit of strength, he helped himself through.

Humid as the air was under the dome, it filled his lungs with renewed life. In a few minutes he felt strong enough to put on his space suit and go out into the open again.

Azara had stopped and was waiting for him—a tall, strange figure encased in shining armor like some female god out of ancient Earth's mythology.

Where were they going? Why was Azara dressed in armor? And where was her bodyguard of Trologs?

Sellery wondered these things as he walked beside Azara across the moss-covered ground from which the frost was melting under the mid-day sun.

And it gave him pleasure to be alone with Azara, to watch her striding along so majestically beside him, to feel her magnetic nearness. On Earth he had never particularly noticed women. But here, on Mars, Azara had already become the alpha and the omega of his life. And yet his reason couldn't tell him why.

"Our planet," Azara was telling him in thoughts, "was once ruled by the Grappies, a different race than we are. They are descended from the ancients who built the water canals, constructed the water-lifting pumps, erected the canal cities. But centuries ago they degenerated into physical weaklings, and it was inevitable that we Trologs conquer them completely."

"Do women rule all the dome cities?" the Earthman asked.

"One hundred and eighty-nine women rule Mars," Azara replied. "One for each of the one hundred and eighty-nine canal cities."

"And no central ruler over all?"

"Why should there be?" Azara answered. "I rule my city, and I wage war with any or all of the other one hundred and eighty-eight cities. What else is there to life?"

Sellery looked up at the small sun in the sky and thought of what Azara had just said. Here on Mars, values of life were different. The ancients had evidently provided easy means for living—cities that had warmth and air and food in abundance, and canals that brought water, and mechanisms that pumped the water across the flat surfaces of the planet. Life to the Trologs offered no

real struggle.

And . . . one woman to a city of several million men! He tried to imagine what it would be like on Earth if a similar condition existed. Even he, who had always been a misogynist, knew how important was the woman factor in every Earthman's life.

But on Mars—a man had neither a wife of his own, nor did he have to make a living. No wonder fighting was their only emotional outlet!

Mars—the red planet of war! Sellery remembered Tolobo's fear of the place, his foreboding long before they reached it. Tolobo had said he could feel the hate that lived and grew in the minds of these decadent Trolog Martians who knew no other interest.

But even as he thought all this with his Earthman's science-mind, Sellery felt an inner glow of war-like energy. All his life he had been a hater of war. But now in these past few weeks, he had felt a psychic change taking place in him. Was the fever of war actually in the air of Mars, that it should also become a part of him!

SELLERY'S thoughts were interrupted by Azara who had stopped, and was standing on the bank of a huge canal. Fully two miles across it was, and the water was as blue-black as the sky.

Off to the left, Sellery could see the coming of many warriors on the canal. They were standing on what appeared to be flat rafts, made of cask-like containers bound together and covered with thin, flat metal sheets.

From the right came another army in every way a duplicate of the one on the left, riding the same kind of bobbing rafts.

When the two armies were a few hundred yards apart, they stopped. Men jumped into the waist-deep water and

held the rafts steady. From the front ranks, about a thousand soldiers from each side advanced toward each other.

Sellery and Azara stood on the bank and watched the strange sight. Through the shallow water, the Trologs strode toward their opponents. Finally they met.

At once the soldiers paired off and fought individual duels. Twin swords flashed in the sunlight as the fighters came together. Men fell, their heads cut clear off, or pierced through the body. Blood ran red in the canal water. And when one man fell, his victorious opponent stepped back until an enemy was free to face him.

Up and down the ranks, the battle raged, with the men on the rafts immobile and silent. Yet Sellery sensed the joy they were feeling at sight of the bloody conflict. Azara, at his side, he knew, was exulting in the gruesome sight. And although he had lost the identity of the men in the fight, he too felt a strange sense of pleasure as he watched.

Fast the men were falling. Finally only a few score were left on each side from the thousand which had fought from each army. And at the end, six men from the army at the right stood waiting while the one remaining man from the army on the left fought them one by one.

A huge giant of a soldier, the solitary fighter was. It filled Sellery with an unholy joy to see him swing his long twin swords in the faces of his opponents, as one by one they came to face death at his hands.

To Sellery, standing on the bank, it was like some ghastly game. And somehow, the rules of the game insisted on individual combat. All six of the soldiers could have rushed the one man and slain him. But instead they fought him one by one, and died at his hands

... one by one.

When the huge warrior, blood-covered from head to waist, stood finally alone between the two armies, he strode through the water to the bank below Azara. He bowed low to her and turned back to his comrades. Already the forces of the right were moving away.

Azara turned to go back to the city. But as Sellery strode along with her, his thoughts became more and more confused.

If the people of Mars were so warlike, why didn't the two armies come together instead of just a small portion of them? Why didn't the armies of one city try to conquer and capture other cities? It seemed only logical.

Azara stopped and looked at him. Evidently she had been reading his thought, for into his mind came her thoughts.

"We fight because we like to fight," she said, "not because we want to win other cities. We have enough for ourselves. What would we do with these other cities?"

"You could become the head ruler over all the cities of Mars," Sellery replied, an unnatural lust for war running like a fire through his blood. "Your army would defeat all other armies. And all peoples on Mars would be your slaves—Trologs and Grappies alike. Great things you could do—build a greater city, cover the planet with communication systems, have war games and sports. You could be empress of Mars!"

"Yes, I could be," Azara replied with sudden eagerness as though the thought had never before occurred to her. "But how? My army is no different than all the others. Man for man, weapon for weapon, all one hundred and eighty-nine canal cities are identical."

Sellery's eyes glowed with enthusiasm as he turned to her. "I can show you

weapons that will kill your enemies by the thousands, by the millions. Guns . . . explosives . . . heat rays . . . gases —I know them all. Today we begin . . . and soon we shall conquer all of Mars!

But even as the thought raced through his mind, the last vestige of earthly conscience spoke to Ansel Sellery and tried to warn him against this fiendish plan.

"Soon we shall conquer all of Mars!" he muttered to himself, as he attempted to still the small, insistent voice within him.

CHAPTER IV

Azara—Empress of Mars!

"YOU know, Tolobo," Sellery was saying to his black friend one day not long afterward, "this place is getting into me somehow."

"Yes," the black man muttered. "Only I wonder if you know how much it's got into you already."

"What do you mean?"

Tolobo looked into the white scientist's face and narrowed his eyes.

"I mean that you aren't the same man who left Earth with me."

Sellery straightened up and his expression hardened. Then, almost immediately he relaxed and smiled.

"Good old Tolobo," he laughed, "still worrying about me. I'm having a grand time here. That fight on the canal . . . why, the old Romans never had sport like that. You should have seen it. And Azara . . . there's a woman for you! Earth has nothing like her. And yet she says there are one hundred and eighty-eight other women on Mars all just like her. I'd like to see them."

Tolobo pointed down at the city.

"And I don't like the way you are showing these people how to make those new super-fire guns. It's murder, that's what it is."

At these words, Sellery's face again hardened. It was obvious that he was holding back his anger.

"Listen, Tolobo," he said savagely, "if I want to show Azara how she can conquer all of Mars, that's my business. And if you are smart, you'll not interfere."

Tolobo shrugged his shoulders, but his eyes remained narrowed.

"Just think," Sellery continued. "In another couple of months, we'll have enough rifles and hand-grenades for Azara's entire army of two million. In addition, we'll have at least a hundred ray guns, a thousand heat guns, and three or four planes. I'm not so sure about the planes—even if they fly, I don't know how to teach these Martians how to fly them. I never was any good as a pilot. How about you, Tolobo, could you teach them?"

The black man shook his head slowly, "Tolobo will not interfere," he said, "but neither will Tolobo help. I shall wait. And one day you will change back to the great scientist I knew on Earth. I will be ready when you wish to go back."

"What if I never want to go back?" Sellery laughed mirthlessly.

"Tolobo will wait."

TWO months later, the fighting men of Azara's city gathered below her tower.

Silently, as they looked up at her, she gave them a message that explained her plans . . . to go forth and conquer all of Mars. She told them the new weapons they had been learning to use would help them win against all the warriors of the planet.

Then, as though it were the symbol of their crusade of terror and death, she raised up in one hand, one of the blue fruit which Sellery had called Martians' Delight. And as she did this, up came

the right arm of every soldier in the ranks below, and in their hands were more of the blue fruit. Then Azara ate her fruit. When she had finished, her two million Trolog soldiers ate theirs.

It was a strange ritual, and it disturbed Sellery's trained scientific mind. Once when he had first come to this place he had wondered about the warlike spirit of the people, and his own gradual change. Could it be possible that it really was this strange blue fruit that caused the trouble? To be true, the Grappies were not allowed to eat it; in fact, death was their punishment for eating the fruit. And Tolobo had not been allowed to eat it, and he had remained untouched by the spirit of war that pervaded the planet.

Before Sellery could ponder longer on the thought, Azara touched his arm.

He slipped into his space suit and followed the armored woman as she went down a long tunnel below her palace. As they descended some distance below the level of the city, Sellery saw that the ground was honeycombed with tunnels—well lighted and dripping with moisture. And everywhere were bushes loaded down with the blue Martian fruit.

As they went along one wide passage, Sellery could hear in the distance the familiar humming sound of electric dynamos. Finally they came to a low, flat room filled with strange mechanisms and machinery.

"What are these?" he asked Azara.

"Pumps," she responded telepathically. "We are now underneath the canal."

Soon they ascended and came up at a little wharf on the canal itself. The water flowed dark and mirky under the low tunnel roof, and Sellery wondered where the army was.

A huge raft came bobbing along, with a number of Trologs poling it into

position. Azara and Sellery got on. Later, as they left the tunnel at the edge of the city's dome, other rafts bobbed up to go along with them. Soon the whole army of two million men went moving down the canal, a silent, grim army, still equipped with their traditional swords, but also holding the strange new weapons that Sellery had designed for them and instructed them in their use.

Next day about noon they saw approaching them, also on rafts, the army from the canal city that was the first to them on the north. Sellery didn't like the looks of things very well. It just wasn't good strategy to meet an army of equal man-power in a water way that offered them so little chance to maneuver. Even with their superior weapons they were bound to lose a lot of men if the two forces got close together. Their new weapons were of greatest advantage if they could hold off the others from coming to grips with them.

Sellery turned to Azara.

"We should land our men, half on one side and half on the other side of the canal. Then, with the enemy in the middle we can cut them down."

Even as he expressed his thoughts, Azara gave out her command and the warriors of her vast army jumped into the shallow water and waded to the bank.

The enemy seemed confused at this departure from the usual formula. For some time they remained on their rafts in the canal and looked up at Azara, standing on the canal's edge. Then a thousand warriors leaped into the water and came toward the bank in obvious challenge to a like number of Azara's forces.

But Azara merely smiled and gave another telepathic signal. A line of rifles was raised and at her silent order,

a single volley sent most of the thousand thrashing and dying into the slow moving waters of the canal. The few remaining looked surprised, halted for a moment, but came bravely on. A second volley finished them.

Azara smiled again at Sellery.

"It was as you promised, Earthman," she said with her mind. "Now I shall order my men to kill the entire army of my neighbor to the north."

ANOTHER thousand men had leaped into the water and were advancing toward them. At Azara's command, the rifles again were raised, and again the men fell as before. And this time the men of Azara's army kept firing, raising the sights of their guns toward the main army of the enemy as it bobbed on its rafts.

Complete confusion reigned almost at once. With men falling all through the ranks, order soon was lost. Warriors jumped in the water and raced toward the banks, swinging their swords futilely. At several places along the canal they actually managed to gain a foothold. But even there they soon fell to the now superior numbers of Azara's army.

A few thousand warriors of the enemy were able to flee up the canal. But of the rest, almost all of the two million died by gunshot or sword or drowning. On Azara's side the losses were slight.

At the same time the horror of it filled Sellery, there was an equally powerful emotion of joy. And when Azara laid her hand on his arm, Sellery knew that joy filled her as well.

A few hours later when they entered the dome city to the north, Sellery and Azara marched at the head of her army. Not a soldier, not a Grappie could be seen. Straight to the central palace they marched. When they finally

stopped at the base of the palace tower, a woman stepped out and faced them alone. She wore armor like Azara, was as tall and as beautiful as she. In fact, as she strode bravely out, two long swords in her hands to face Azara and her army of two million, she was in every detail the exact counterpart of Azara.

"Her name is Azurka," the latter said to Sellery. "I told you once that all one hundred and eighty-nine rulers of Mars are alike. This woman I would like to fight with my swords, but your weapons, Earthman, are stronger."

Azara then turned to one of her soldiers and took the rifle from his hands. Aiming carefully she was just about to fire when Sellery pushed up the barrel of the gun and the shot went high.

There was a tense moment while Azara faced him, thoughts of anger raging through her mind.

"I have a better idea," Sellery said to her, breaking into her thoughts. "Why not keep this other woman as your slave . . . your personal slave, to wait on you as none of your men soldiers or Grappies have ever been able to do? Spare her life, and make good use of her."

Sellery could feel the various thoughts racing through Azara's mind at his suggestion — feminine satisfaction at humbling a foe, cautious fear that she was making a mistake, and womanly jealousy at his words in the other's behalf. Suddenly she turned and gave the rifle back to the soldier.

CHAPTER V

Disaster!

IT was a year later—a long Martian year, equal to almost two Earth years.

Azara sat on a regal throne in her palace, her one hundred and eighty-

eight identical hand maidens assembled in back of her. The war for conquest of Mars had been completely successful—each of the great canal cities had fallen beneath the force of Azara's men equipped with Earth-type weapons. It had been a slaughter of soldiers; millions upon millions had died in the war. And always as each city fell, the woman ruler had been taken by Azara into her group of handmaidens.

Sellery stood before Azara, his cheeks flushed, his eyes glowing with excitement. Beside him was Tolobo, his black face sullen and unfriendly.

"The war, the glorious war," Sellery was saying with his telepathic thoughts, "is over! All Mars is yours, Azara, to do with as you will. The soldiers of your enemies are dead. The rulers of all other canal cities are your handmaidens. You are Empress of Mars—ruler of all the canals, the deserts, the fields, all one hundred and eighty-nine cities."

"But what now?" she asked quietly, looking deep into his eyes. "There is no one left to fight, the whole of Mars is mine. We Trolog Martians are happy only when we are fighting or preparing to fight. Now there is no one left."

A frown came to Sellery's forehead. What Azara had said was true. And the thought that there was no one left to fight disturbed this strange, unnatural fever for combat in his own blood. He turned to Tolobo.

The black man's expression lighted up, and he said, "Perhaps we can go back now—to Earth?"

Sellery peered up at Azara, and saw a look of dismay cross her face.

"You cannot go," she said. "You are my mate. It is for this that we conquered Mars together."

Sellery shook his head, trying to clear up the confusion in his mind. Some power greater than himself was in con-

trol of his desires, he knew. And two things he wanted above all things: he wanted Azara as his mate, and he wanted war—eternal bloody war! It was a fever that fired him to action. There was no stopping the burning thoughts in his mind.

Later when the council meeting was over, Sellery walked alone back and forth across the floor of his room in the palace. He couldn't get out of his brain the conflict that raged there between his new love for Martian war and his old habits of Earth.

Suddenly he stopped. A thought had come to him—a Martian thought full of war cunning. Why stop with conquering Mars! Why not go on to Earth? With Azara beside him and all the resources of Mars at his command, there was no limit to the conquests he could make.

The glowing lust of battle was shining in his eyes as he left his room and headed for Azara's part of the palace. He found her with a half dozen travel-stained Trolog warriors standing in a line in front of her.

As he entered, Azara turned her eyes on him. The stream of her thoughts came rushing into his mind.

"These men have just come from the outer canal cities. They bring strange good news. The Grappies in those many cities have been eating the warrior fruit, and they have killed the guards I left in the cities. They are everywhere uniting against us."

Her expression was one of supreme joy as she sent these thoughts to him.

"And once again we will have war," she said. "Even war against Grappies is better than no war at all."

SELLERY turned to the six soldiers and immediately caught their thoughts. Something was wrong. They were frightened—they were not like the

brave warriors who had helped conquer Mars. Furthermore they bore unmistakable evidence of having been in a serious fight. Even as Sellery looked at them, one of the Trolog warriors slumped and almost fell.

In the news they brought they had tried to describe the huge army of Grappies already marching against them. Sellery forgot all about his idea to conquer Earth in listening to the strangely half-incoherent stories of the returned men. Azara, he could see, was paying little attention to what they said, her own mind filled with thoughts of fighting and war again.

When the six warriors were dismissed from Azara's presence, Sellery went with them. Walking down the long slanting corridor to the ground level, Sellery kept one of the Trologs in conversation.

"Tell me all you know about this new danger," he asked the man.

The Trolog looked back up the corridor to be sure Azara was not in sight.

"They come," he sent his thoughts in a jumbled disorder to the Earthman, "they come—a hundred million or more of them. The Grappies want back the land and cities which we Trologs took from them so many centuries ago.

"When we killed off the Trologs of the other canal cities we gave them



their chance. They have eaten of the fruit, and their workmen have copied the guns which we have. Now they are coming!

"I tried to tell our ruler," the man continued wildly, "but she wouldn't listen. Already it may be too late!"

"What do you mean?" Sellery demanded.

"Unless we stop them, the Grappies of this city will let in the huge horde from outside. Once inside they will kill every Trolog. We just barely escaped their advance armies."

Sellery thought fast. For the moment he was more Earthman than Martian. He tried to reason what was best to do. He turned to the soldier.

"Send one of your men to warn the warriors of the city. Then get twenty men and come to me. I'll wait for you in my apartment."

With these orders given, Sellery raced back to the upper levels of the palace. He got out his space suit, fastened his weapons to his belt, and waited impatiently for the return of the Trologs.

When they came he hurried them down rear corridors to the storage rooms on the lower levels. In one huge room were about fifty large box-like containers which he instructed the men to bring out to the transport car loading platform. In another room were several smaller boxes which he also had them carry with them.

Outside the palace, after several trips with the boxes, they loaded all into several cars. Sellery asked the men to come with him. In a few minutes they reached Sellery's space ship where it had been resting in its special niche in the great dome-framework at the edge of the city ever since it had been brought there shortly after the Earthman's coming.

With the help of the Trolog warriors,

Sellery quickly loaded the boxes into the cargo hold of the space ship. Leaving his own space suit inside the ship he went back to the transport car, and returned with the warriors to the palace. He told them to join their comrades in the coming battle.

The Earthman felt a strange sense of exhilaration as he hurried through the deserted palace grounds to the servants' section where Tolobo had been living. As he pushed open a door leading into the Grapple part of the palace he came suddenly to a scene that stopped him short.

TOLOBO was standing with his back to the wall, swinging a long Trolog sword as a dozen Grappies tried to rush him. At Tolobo's back was the entrance to the corridor leading to the upper levels.

With one blast of his frequency gun, Sellery swept the Grappies out of existence.

"There isn't much time," he shouted to his black friend. "Get your space suit—we're going back to Earth."

The black man let out a yell of joy and rolled his big, black eyes ecstatically.

"I knew you would go back some day," he cried and dashed into his room for the space suit which he swung easily over his muscular shoulders.

Up the long slanting ramp they ran to the level where Azara's rooms were located. The two Earthmen found her fastening on her armor, surrounded by the nearly two hundred other queens of Mars, all dressing for battle.

It was only by observing which one of the women seemed to be in command that Sellery could pick out Azara. He went to her side.

The Grappies are coming," he said with his thoughts.

"We will fight them and defeat

them," she replied calmly.

Sellery's heart went out to her—so beautiful, so eternally the perfect woman. And all these other women, identical in every respect. These women, like a company of Valkyrie, were going forth with two million warriors to battle a hundred million Grappies. It was magnificent!

But he knew the odds. And something of his old Earthman's caution stirred inside him as he looked at Azara and smiled.

"You are brave, my beautiful queen," he said, "but are you brave enough to go with me across the great cold void to the planet Earth?"

Sellery could see Tolobo scowl at the suggestion.

Azara's face, too, lost its smile. "And you want me to leave this battle? War is all we Trologs live for."

"But suppose the Grappies win! They will kill you, all of you, and then there will be no Trologs anywhere in all the wide universe."

"I stay to fight," Azara insisted.

"Come with me and you will see a greater fight than any that Mars has ever seen. Come with me and together we will conquer all of Earth!"

"But how?" Azara asked, her eyes wide with wonder.

Sellery smiled.

Twenty million Trolog eggs in the store rooms! he laughed. "I have taken them to my space ship and stored them there. And enough fruit seed to feed them after reaching Earth. Twenty million warriors we will take with us to conquer Earth—no, not as grown soldiers, but as eggs to be incubated after we get there, and grown and developed into an army of fighting men such as Earth has never seen before. Then you will see a war in which blood will flow like rivers, and all of Earth will be ours!"

At these transmitted thoughts, Azara's eyes lighted up with realization and joy.

"I will go with you," she sent the thought to him.

Sellery turned to his black friend. "The day you have waited for is here, Tolobo. Now we go back to your beloved Earth."

TOLOBO scowled still deeper, but said nothing. In his black eyes shone an animal cunning. Try as he could, Sellery could not understand the black man's thoughts.

As the three marched to the car landing platform, with the handmaidens following, a strange sight burst on their gaze below. From all directions, Grappies were converging on the palace. Facing them were the Trolog warriors of Azara.

As those on the balcony looked down, the two forces came together. At first it seemed that the Grappies were stopped. But soon, by sheer force of numbers, they pushed forward again. Trolog warriors were swinging their long swords with deadly effect. Others were shooting with guns, pointblank at the oncoming Grappies. But as fast as the front ranks of Grappies fell, others rushed to take their places.

Sellery, Tolobo, and Azara leaped into one car, with the rest of the women following in other cars.

Setting the controls at top speed, Sellery flew straight for the edge of the city to where the space ship rested. Coming down beside it, his heart for the moment sank. For a cordon of several thousand Grappies surrounded the huge ship.

Pulling out his frequency gun, Sellery leaped from the car, with Tolobo beside him on one side and Azara on the other. Straight for the ship they headed, with Sellery blasting a path through the

Grappies. Then, suddenly the mechanism of the gun went dead!

A rushing horde of Grappies came toward them on their short legs, their gnome-like bodies half bent over, their hands grasping weapons of all kinds.

Sellery could hear Tolobo's hand revolver popping away on his left. He could see, out of the corner of his eye, Azara was a symphony of motion, with her twin swords helping to cut a way through the mob of Grappies.

The Earthman picked up one of the creatures bodily and threw him at his fellows. In another instant they would be smothered under the flood of little men. Then Sellery heard a strange whirring sound behind and around them.

It was the coming of the warrior handmaidens into the battle. And the whirring sound was the slash of their twin swords as they fought their way to the three.

Fighting, hacking every step of the way, they managed to reach the air lock of the space ship. Azara went in first, then Tolobo. The last Sellery saw as he clambered in, the thirty or so remaining queens of Mars, left from the one hundred and eighty-eight, were fighting in a circle about the air lock, their backs to him, battling to let Azara escape and preserve the race.

Then Sellery slammed shut the lock and hurried to the control room. With no windows anywhere to look out, the battle on Mars must forever be left unfinished for him. There was work to be done if they were to get away.

In the control room, he pressed a button, and even through the thick multiple shell of the space ship, he felt the shock of the explosion. He had blown

up a section of the dome covering the city, so they could get the ship into the open.

Then he called to Tolobo to tie Azara and himself down into acceleration hammocks. Fastening himself to the control seat, he pulled a row of levers and at once there was a series of blasts from the under jets. If the warrior queens still survived, he shuddered to think what the flame from the jets was doing to them now.

In the acceleration that followed, Sellery lost consciousness, as did the others. Hours later, he awoke to find himself tied into an acceleration hammock. Azara was in the next hammock to him.

"Tolobo," he called, "where are you?"

"Right here," the black man said as he came running up, all smiles. "And here's some good old fashioned vegetable soup for you—from Earth."

"Release me from these bonds at once," Sellery ordered.

"Not just yet," Tolobo smiled. "For a few weeks, as we go toward Earth you will eat only Earth food. And when you are no longer under the influence of that strange blue fruit of Mars, then I shall release you."

"And Azara?" Sellery asked.

"She is all right," his black friend replied. "She likes this Earth soup. When I told her it would make her lose her craving for battle and for war, she said she would die before she ate any. But when I told her it would make her think more of love, she tasted it. She says it is good."

"Did she say that?" Sellery asked quietly. "Perhaps you are right, Tolobo, my friend. You are always right."



RIDDLES OF SCIENCE

What is Matter?

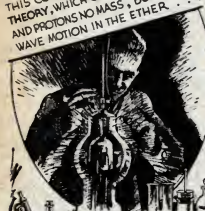


THE ANCIENT GREEKS CONCEIVED THE UNIVERSE TO BE CONSTRUCTED OF FOUR ELEMENTS - EARTH, FIRE, WATER, AND AIR . .

DE BROGLIE SHATTERED THIS CONCEPT WITH HIS WAVE THEORY, WHICH GAVE THE ELECTRONS AND PROTONS NO MASS, BUT SIMPLY WAVE MOTION IN THE ETHER . . .



MODERN SCIENTISTS, DELVING INTO THE MYSTERY, IMAGINED ELECTRONS and PROTONS OF EXTREME SMALLNESS, REVOLVING ABOUT EACH OTHER JUST AS THE PLANETS DO ABOUT THE SUN . . .



THE LATEST CONCEPT

IS A CONCEPT OF MATTER AS ENERGY, CALLED THE QUANTUM THEORY . THIS HAS LED TO A COMPLICATED DESIGNATION OF MANY KINDS OF MATERIAL "BUILDING BLOCKS" SUCH AS POSITRONS, NEGATRONS, NEUTRONS, ELECTROMAGNETIC VIBRATIONS, ETC, - BUT THEIR REAL NATURE IS STILL UNKNOWN .

EVER since man has been able to comprehend the fact that around him were various substances that had something in common, and yet held an elusive quality of individuality that set them apart, he has sought to fathom the mystery of the nature of matter. Present day science has advanced several theories, and the more recent of them, based on Einstein's theories and discoveries, relegate the old concept of matter as a substance into the discard. Matter is now postulated as "energy" in various forms, from electric vibrations, to negative charges, based on new magnetic science.

The UNDERGROUND CITY

CHAPTER I

Disappearing Miners

By

**BERTRAND L.
SHURTLEFF**

PRESIDENT OGILVIE of the Mount Cintron Mining Company stared hard at the alert young man who was watching him across his desk. There was so much incredulity in the youthful face that he was unable to go on. Twice he half opened his mouth as if to blurt out something, only to close it again, look disconcerted, and shake his head.

"You won't believe it," he spat out at last. "Nobody does. The widows are clamoring we're too tight-fisted to

uncover the bodies of their men. The union officials are howling. The mining commission is threatening action—"

He shrugged hopelessly, bit off the end of the cigar he had been waving about, and glowered.

The young man eyed him doubtfully, his very posture expressing his disapproval of President Ogilvie.

"Well," impatiently, "what's the story? Why don't you dig 'em out?

The expense would hardly be as bad as the accumulated ill-will you're piling up by refusing common decency."

DEEP down in the mine, where there were no other exits, miners vanished into thin air. It was impossible, but true—





Ogilvie turned purple and slammed a fist on the desk. A big fist, one that had earned callouses on a pick mucking in the very mine that he now controlled.

"They ain't there to be dug, wise guy! They're gone! Disappeared!"

"Through the looking glass, I suppose."

But the pleasantry was lost on Ogilvie, who had been picking slag in a breaker house when he might have been reading Alice in Wonderland.

"I mean it, Hazelton. They're gone. We cleaned up the fall. Found one man crushed under it—but not a single sign of the fifteen men who should have been trapped beyond. Nothing but their tools and cars and the coal they'd blasted. No bodies and no explanation of what could have happened to 'em."

The investigator sat up and whistled.

"Any sign of foul play? There's been plenty of labor trouble here, as well as over the rest of the country. Union fighting union. Sabotage and that sort of thing. Anybody behind this?"

Ogilvie puffed fiercely at the cigar, squinting over the match he held waveringly at the end.

"The telephone wires had been cut. The cribbing looked as if it had been shoved down. In fact, there were sections of it that had been shoved down where the roof had held."

Hazelton nodded. "Regular procedure of these union agitators. Pull a few men and try to terrorize the others. Your missing men will turn up as soon as the organizing quiets down."

Ogilvie puffed on in moody silence for a full minute. His heavy face did not lighten, nor did the enthusiasm of the younger man fire him. Somehow he had the look of an awed and beaten man, his skin being livid except where the blue lines like irregular tattooing proclaimed that he had been a coal

miner and would carry that imbedded coal in his scar tissues to the grave.

"The others haven't come back—yet," he said slowly. "None of 'em—and it's all of fifteen years."

Hazelton bent forward eagerly, his eyes darkening as his brows drew down. "Then something of this kind happened once before?"

"Three times. Five years apart. It seems to be getting to be a regular procedure. Fifteen years ago, when I was a straw boss on the bottom level, we had a cave-in. Two of 'em, in fact, a few days apart. Each time we lost fifteen men—and never found hide nor hair of 'em."

Hazelton was looking at him with that skeptical expression with which he might have regarded an insane man. But Ogilvie was too engrossed in memories to pay any attention to his listener.

"In another five years, when I was assistant super, we had another. Thirty-two men trapped on that same bottom level. We had phones then. But we figured they'd gone stark crazy when they jabbered about a monster that carried off half of them and crawled into the solid wall.

"Then they called that it was coming back—and the wire went dead. We hurried the rescue work, but not a man was left when we got there. Nor a sign of a body."

The silence was impressive. The cigar went out, unnoticed.

The big face moved again. "Five years ago it struck again. Thirty-eight men were trapped the same way on that cursed level. Phone went out before the fall. That time we found eight corpses. The coroner frankly admitted he didn't know what had killed them. None of the regular mine troubles like black damp or gas. All had such horror written on their faces that it made a man sick to look at them."

He shuddered, looked at his cold cigar, and hurled it into the wastebasket.

"Hazelton," he snapped, lifting to his feet and pacing like a caged wild thing, "that's why I sent for you. Thirty men each time before. Five years between return visits. Only fifteen this time. I'm counting on you to solve the ghastly riddle before the rest of the usual thirty are grabbed."

Hazelton smiled as though pacifying an alarmed child. "I'll have a look around down there. Ought to get something from the cribbing that was knocked down. Might even locate the getaway. There must be a secret passage—"

Ogilvie snorted his contempt. "As if I don't know my own mine, me what picked slag, mucked, and wangled my way up from the very bottom level. But go ahead and satisfy yourself. Only don't take too long. We've got contracts to fill, and we've got to have coal from that bottom level. I can't hold 'em out of there forever—and I don't dare let 'em go back again for fear we'll lose fifteen more."

"Little danger of that," smiled Hazelton reassuringly. "I believe you'll be perfectly safe in sending them back. But I'll have a look around first to satisfy you."

IT was one thing to scoff at President Ogilvie's tales in his office above ground, but it was quite another matter to think of them in those eerie depths where the cage finally deposited him. Even with the electric lights turned on for his special benefit, the gently sloping black caverns on every side seemed filled with the mysterious and the unknown.

He followed the broad back of the grim president toward the scene of the recent cave-in. Although he had been

down in many coal mines before, the depth and extensive workings of this one appalled him.

"Deepest mine in the state," grunted Ogilvie, turning to light him on his way, swinging a bird cage in one hand and an electric flash in the other. "Maybe that explains why—"

He did not finish, but resumed his trudging, his eyes on the canary, which they carried instead of the customary screened lamp to test for danger. It seemed miles that they traversed vaulted passages and mighty cribbed chambers before they finally came to a pile of damaged cribbing and new replacements of heavy timber that lifted to an irregular ceiling from which the recent fall had evidently come.

Hazelton examined the scarred and smashed timbers carefully in the light of his beam. They were scored with odd curved gashes which had been made recently, marks that he could not comprehend.

Beyond the fall Ogilvie waved his light at other timbers that had fallen without bringing down the roof. These were likewise cut and gouged with the same peculiar markings, almost as if caught in the curves of some mighty auger.

A little shudder ran along the young investigator's spine in spite of his outward calmness. Some sixth sense seemed to warn him that he was dealing with things beyond the ordinary ken of men.

"And this ahead was blocked off?" he asked crisply.

Ogilvie nodded, sweeping his beam into the dark depths. "Barely fifty yards straight ahead, but with chambers on each side. Big vein of solid coal through here."

"I'll carry on from here alone, if it suits you. Just leave me the canary, and I'll be okay. I want to go over

every inch of the walls."

The president handed over the bird cage, started back toward the shaft, then seemed to think better of it.

"I'll show you something," he said grimly.

He walked to the face of the coal vein a few yards beyond the damaged timbering and swept his light along the wall. A huge circular hole, somewhat larger in diameter than his towering six feet two, dipped into the glittering coal a scant foot to eighteen inches.

"There is always a spot like this after it happens," he whispered.

Hazelton stared incredulously. The wall looked for all the world as if a mighty auger had started to tear a great hole in that solid face, leaving the same type of curved scars on it that had been left on the timbering, only in plainer pattern here, almost as if something had churned its way through and left the mangled coal behind.

He lifted the pick that he had brought with him and struck the markings. A fragment of the coal broke loose and fell. Eagerly he stuck the pick into the crevice he had made and pried, but the packed mass did not yield, as he had anticipated, in a flaking along that curve. Instead he broke off a mere splintering of the hard coal.

"Always there's a loose heap in front of the face," Ogilvie continued to whisper. "But the core, or track, or whatever you want to call it, is firm as the rest of the face. We followed that first one thirty feet."

"And found what?" sharply.

"That it went into the solid rock beyond. Left just the same sort of markings there, only the track turned sharply down. We gave it up after ten feet of rock. There seemed no use in following farther."

Hazelton gave him another of those incredulous looks and turned away

from the dent.

"I'll come back to this later," he shrugged. "Think I'll have a look around first. Somebody's pulling your leg, Mister Ogilvie, and I'll make you admit it. See you topside when I'm through down here."

BUT four hours later, when he came wearily back to that odd boring, he had lost some of his cockiness. He had tunked and sounded every foot of passage and chamber beyond where the fall had taken place without finding a sign of any concealed passage.

"Whatever it is," he said grimly, staring at the markings, "I don't believe it. That cock-and-bull story about following a similar boring through solid rock shows that Ogilvie's trying to put something over."

"I'm sorry you have such a low opinion of my father," said a soft voice behind him.

He whirled and stared into a large pair of luminous eyes that caught the beam of his flash from the vague whiteness of a face a few scant feet away. The color of the rain coat of rubberized material blended so with the walls that he thought her face disembodied and floating eerily at first.

"He's really greatly upset about this mystery," the voice went on. "I believe he is seriously shaken. He called you in because he wants an end to this horror, an honest explanation of what happens to his men. My father is not the popular conception of a miner baron who grinds the working men under ruthlessly."

He liked the girl's pique. Her anger for her father heightened her color. Instinctively he felt drawn to her.

"I can hardly understand why you're here, if he thinks some horror haunts this bottom level."

She flushed even brighter. "I slipped

down here without his knowledge or permission. He has ordered everybody connected with the mine to stay away from this level until the mystery can be explained."

Hazelton shrugged again, toying with some chunks he had just pried from that oddly scarred circle.

"That might not take too long," he said cheerfully. "I think I've found something that might prove to be a lead. Some of this coal in these odd markings has been sprayed with something to make it cohere before it was pressed into place. Probably analysis of the glue will start us on the right track. Meanwhile I want this hole cleared out. I'm not so sure it will lead to such a rock phenomenon as your father claimed the other led to."

She looked at him earnestly. Her eyes were large with wonder, begging for his confidence.

"My father is not a dishonest man," she insisted quietly.

"I'm not saying anybody is," he said, looking into those liquid eyes and wishing fervently that he might have her faith. "I'm here to find out why those men disappeared. That being my job, I'm going at it to solve it—no matter where the trail leads."

CHAPTER II

The Horror in the Mine

TWO days later he was back in the same spot watching a group of grim faced men boring into that swirl of markings. Muckers were ready to shovel the loosened coal into waiting cars. Timber was piled in readiness to crib the passage they would tear into the face.

"Ogilvie hasn't broken," he muttered as the drills bit into the coal, "though he couldn't show me other markings."

"That," said the girl at his elbow, "was, as he explained, because that section of the mine has been worked out and abandoned. The roof fell in long ago. It would cost thousands to clear them."

"So you're here again?" he began, shouting to drown the biting hammering of the drill. "Your father gave strict orders you're to be hustled to the surface if you show your nose down here again. Better get going."

"Make me."

He liked the sauciness of her. But she needed a firm hand. He stepped forward, seized her just above the elbow with thumb and finger, and started propelling her toward the shaft. For a minute she tried violent resistance, then found that she could do nothing against that steely urge, and succumbed, laughing.

They had taken but a dozen steps when a shuddering, grinding roar filled the passage ahead of them, something that drowned even the violent yammering of the drill behind.

"What's that?" asked the girl, halting.

He stepped to her side, putting that arm around her protectingly by instinct, his blood chilling at the mighty rending of rock and coal in that dimly lighted passage ahead. Then something burst out of the solid wall a few yards beyond them, a mighty rotating thing of worming vanes and cutting blades not unlike the edges of an auger, yet working down the pointed surface of a snub-nosed engine that came rearing and tumbling like an army tank through the gaping hole it had torn in the wall.

Before he could move or cry out, the thing lunged and lumbered toward them, riding slowly on those rotating vanes. Then horror gripped him as the cribbing started to go down, under the grind of that monster machine that

came fighting out from under the rushing fall of rock to chase them back toward the workers.

Hazelton's flash disclosed a window with ghastly great eyes behind it, eyes that seemed to be directing the fearful machine. With the passage completely blocked behind them by the fall, the rumbling car gave up knocking down cribbing and continued to rock and lunge forward.

The girl leaped for the phone, but the boring monster halted, a door opened suddenly, and a pair of huge shears slid out to find and sever the wires before she could summon the operator.

Meanwhile the miners had sighted the terrifying engine and had gathered behind Hazelton and the girl to stare at it.

The door opened wider and a creature stepped from it. At first glance it appeared to be a bird as large as a man covered with downy feathers and staring at them out of large luminous eyes. Then the feathers were thrown back and were revealed as a cloak covering the oddest figure any of them had ever beheld.

SHAPED like a man, the being looked more like a glass exhibit of a human anatomy, for the skin was opalescent and transparent, so that muscles, tendons, joints, and even pulsing blood vessels were visible to the naked eye. Even the muscles partook in some measure of the transparency, being so ethereal in texture that the outlines of the bones were vaguely discernible through them.

But the face was ghastly. It was overlaid with the opalescent transparency that covered the body, but it was like a horribly skinned face under a layer of cellophane, with the eyeballs laid open, the teeth in grinning display, and the jawbone, antrims, and skull

showing through.

Recoiling, Hazelton flung up an arm to save the girl from a further contemplation of the nightmare, while he dipped with the other hand for his automatic. But before he could whip it into action, those horrible eyes had noted the movement and the hand that looked like a grim demonstration in some biology laboratory pointed a thin cane at him. Instantly he felt himself frozen by a thin spray that lashed at them. His limbs refused to function, although his mind remained active. Only his frantic eyeballs could turn, rolling about to discover the girl equally rigid beside him, her pleading eyes turned up to him hopelessly.

More of the odd men issued from the machine. At a command from the first, they lifted Hazelton, then stopped to stare at the girl's body, which he had concealed from their view.

Exclamations of wonder burst from them. Their leader advanced and stared at her, seemed hesitant what to do with her, then waved to have her carried after Hazelton toward that yawning door.

Inside the odd vehicle they caught a glimpse of a maze of controls as mystifying to the uninitiated as those of a modern submarine. Then they were bundled into a sort of storage chamber and stood up against a wall, to be braced in position by the similarly stiffened bodies of the miners and muckers who had been working at the hole.

Seemingly satisfied with his catch, the leader returned to the controls, ordered the door clamped tight, and, discernible to the prisoners through a window in their chamber, started manipulating the gadgets arrayed about him.

Slowly, rocking but slightly, the thing turned, backed, weaved until it faced directly at the hole where the min-

ers had been working. Then it ground forward and, with a mighty roar of slicing blades biting into solid coal that a pick bounced from when swung with a man's full strength, they slid slowly into the gleaming coal face.

An anxious helper ran aft to force his way between the stiff bodies of the prisoners and peer out of the rear window. Seemingly satisfied, he flashed a light signal to the operator, and the car halted.

Then a switch was thrown over and something clanked violently against the rear of their prison. Hazelton stared incredulously at that rear window, now banked on the outside with the very coal that the worming tank had just hurled behind it with its slicing vanes. Evidently the operator knew some magnetic influence that would draw the coal up to his machine.

The hissing of a spray confirmed his theory that the coal had been glutinated by some unknown substance, the nature of which his laboratory experiments had failed to reveal. He could see a trickle of something wet stealing over that coal outside the rear window.

Then their captors wrapped themselves afresh in their odd featherlike cloaks. Soon an oppressive heat filled the mechanical mole, but not melting away the icy embalming influence that gripped the prisoners, although making their skin uncomfortably warm and starting the sweat to coursing.

Hazelton made a mental note that the feathery cloaks must be asbestos treated in some special way. Then, after what had evidently been pause enough to allow the quick-drying cement on the coal to harden, they rocked and ground on again.

The terrific roar and din of the grinding advance, made possible by the way those revolving vanes gripped the rock, tore it loose, and shoved it behind them,

to pack it into place with a hardness that rivaled its original condition, was deafening. Even if they had been thawed sufficiently to move their vocal organs, it was doubtful if the prisoners could have communicated. Their captors made no effort at speech, but signaled each other with an elaborate system of tiny lights.

The clatter and roar and churn of their advance changed from time to time. When they struck harder rock it sang louder, and the advance slowed. Then they would slice through something softer with a relief of the clangor and a definite increase in speed.

The angle had changed until it was an acute descent that sent them boring deeper and deeper toward the vitals of the earth. They shot through sand heavy with entombed oil. They plowed down into more and more rock.

The heat inside the borer became more and more intense. Their speed accelerated. The prisoners grew sick and giddy, packed together like so many big dolls, utterly oblivious to the pressure of the weight of the others upon them. Only the terrific heat registered on their nerves, except sound and vision.

Unconsciousness claimed them, an unconsciousness that was vaguely broken from time to time to the monotony of that seemingly endless sliding down into the very core of the earth.

THEN they all awakened with a start to that numbed state they had known ever since being sprayed. Slowly they became aware that the mechanical mole was unbearably hot and that their captors were suffering miseries inside their great cloaks, while they frantically directed the vehicle.

They had been awakened by contact with something seemingly impenetrable, for the mechanical mole was turning

slowly and inching along its surface.

Suddenly a buzzer sounded, and one of their captors leaped to an instrument panel that had been previously ignored. Swiftly he adjusted the dials. A soft voice began speaking in the unknown tongue of the weird men.

Relief showed in the eyes of the leader, the only part of his ghastly face revealed through the mantling cloak. He swiftly changed the course of the mole. They slid and clattered along, apparently over a smooth but impenetrable metallic surface. Then they halted and began a conversation over a two-way radio phone.

Finally the ship ground forward again. Lights flashed through the windows, revealing ponderous doors closing behind them. Then a deluge of sprayed water hit the hot exterior of the mole, sending up a mighty hissing and clouding everything with steam.

Half an hour later the steam had dissipated, and a number of other odd figures in similar feathery capes came to throw open the door. Like porters they staggered out with the stiffened cargo, standing each in the very position he had been caught in when that paralyzing spray hit him.

Hazelton noted that they were apparently in a great lock, for the chamber was cylindrical with what appeared to be massive doors at each end, controlled by great wheels and heavy dogs. A compressor of some kind was kicking away, as if to regulate pressure or some equally important feature within the chamber to whatever lay beyond that massive door dogged shut with mighty chunks of metal.

Then he looked about at his comrades, already arrayed like so many cigar store Indians in a row. Some crouched in the fear they had known at the approach of the weird men, faces contorted in horror, eyes bulging. Some

had doubled their fists as if to fight. Two or three had thrown up an arm as if in a protection that availed nothing. He himself was posed in the grandly defensive manner he had automatically assumed to guard the girl, although he felt foolish about it now, caught so definitely in his heroics.

The weary leader from the mole barked an order. One of the lock attendants lifted a spray gun and played it over the prisoners. Slowly the freezing numbness left them. Strength flowed through their limbs. They became acutely aware of their hearts resuming beating and the gasping of their lungs.

"My God, what is this?" gasped the girl in reverent horror. "Are we all dead? Is this—is this the future existence?"

One of the attendants shuffled forward and threw back his hood. The face thus revealed was human, except for the horror and hopelessness etched deeply into the features. The eyes were almost maniacal as they stared from one to another.

Suddenly a miner gasped and took a half step forward, his eyes bulging.

"You—you ain' Joe Doake's gran'-fadder?" he called excitedly. "You look so much like Joe I'm sure you be."

The head lifted. The feeble shoulders, which had evidently been broad and powerful before they wasted, went back with an effort. Something akin to a laugh, but a horrible cackle of unpleasant sound, issued from toothless gums.

"I am Joe Doake," the feeble voice whispered. "And you," blinking and peering, "you're Sam Tavarick, aincha? Remember drinkin' beer with me down at Andy's place, the night Forty-Six voted to strike? Yea, I'm Joe." Then, as the other recoiled, "Been through enough to make anybody old. But

you'll find out soon enough. Too damned soon, if you ask me."

The old eyes filled with tears. The thin voice quavered weakly, broke.

"But I'm sorry they caught you, Sam, though I'm glad to be through. Wore out, I am. Be put out of my awful misery



It seemed for an instant that the old man would turn on his captor, and in spite of his weakened condition, attempt to wreak vengeance for the incredible torture it was all too evident he had gone through down here in this hell far beneath the surface of the known world.

But then, as the guard's weapon expressed its menace, the tottering figure of Doake became a jabbering, fearful thing groveling on his knees for mercy.

"No, don't give me no more punishment," he wailed. "Kill me, if you

now, with you here to carry on for 'em. Like a wore-out horse."

The old eyes blazed anger. The old fists clenched. A guard lifted his weapon threateningly.

must, but no more of that hell. I'll be good. I won't do anything."

Hazelton reached out a reassuring hand.

"But tell us, man, what is the meaning of it all? Where are we?"

"And why are we here?" demanded the girl. "Who are these strange beings?"

Doake saw her for the first time, noted her sex. An even deeper horror swept over his face. He shook as if with a chill.

"Kill yourself at the first chance," he jabbered. "Don't do what they want. They won't keep no promises. They'll trick you, the fiends. Don't do it for 'em. I know what they brought you for, but refuse, refuse! Do you hear me? REFUSE!"

His voice had lifted. His weary old body had grown taut with nervous excitement. Suddenly it jerked spasmodically, his hands gripped at his heart, and he crumpled, to twitch and then lie still on the hard metal at their feet.

"Heart," whispered Hazelton, his own face blanched.

"What could he have meant?" asked the girl, cowering in terror.

"Probably just insane babbling," Hazelton tried to soothe her. "Hold onto yourself, and we'll soon find out."

THE dogs were already lifting from the door beyond. Soon the thick door swung open with the ease of a massive time-locked entrance to a mighty bank vault. They blinked unbelievably at the scene before them.

Grouped under a massive domed ceiling of something dull and dark that looked like a fused metal bubble of gigantic size, there lay as weird a city as ever haunted a nightmare. Hazelton knew that he was dreaming and that he would soon wake to chuckle over the monstrosities, but his scientific interest

made him note the definite signs of a planned creation, more man-made than any city on the earth's surface.

The massive dome seemed braced and supported by an intricate array of beams and girders that laced upward like flying buttresses. Along them and along the walls ran mighty conductors in the openings of which fans whirled to suck or blast. Everywhere there were controls, wheels, gears, cranks, levers.

Machines pumped and labored away noiselessly and efficiently. Like some fantastic idea of a World's Fair of the future, the unbelievable whole throbbed and hummed with a mechanical vitality that was astounding.

Then he saw the people. Hordes of the same kind of creatures as their captors were drawn up beyond a row of guards to stare at them as people on the surface of the earth might stare at some unheard of creatures just captured in some far off land.

Their skin and flesh had the same ghastly transparent iridescence, but the garments they wore were diaphanous in nature, obviously designed for adornment and concealment rather than for warmth or protection.

Suddenly the ranks opened and seven sedate figures with serious mien came stalking through, dressed in ceremonial robes. Frowning, they drew up in front of the prisoners to accept the report of the leader of the raid.

He spoke volubly, then turned and pointed toward the girl. The seven started, stared, then came forward to investigate. As they put out those horrible claws to paw at her, Hazelton drew her back angrily and snarled at them to leave her alone.

They recoiled in evident alarm, staring at his face. The guard leaped forward with lifting weapons.

"Hold it, feller, or you'll get plenty

punishment," called a voice in drawling English. "You ain't topside now. These skinless wonders can make you sweat, even if they can't sweat themselves."

The prisoners turned with one accord to see the shambling figure coming to act as interpreter. He too was bent and aged, although probably prematurely.

"You're here for a five year hitch," he nodded, chewing away at something as though it were gum or tobacco. "Five years o' sweatin' to keep these gooks livin' in ease and then—blotto. I'm allowed a six months stay to learn one o' you mugs the lingo. Then it's curtains for me."

He saw the girl as Hazelton's arm lowered slowly. Instead of staring in horror he began to grin.

"Now they're startin' something," he chuckled. "Told 'em they ought to long ago. Say, you ain't the super's kid, grewed into a woman, be you? You look a lot like her."

Miss Ogilvie nodded. Recognition showed in her face.

"You're the man who whittled me the boat?"

"Yeah," shaking his head, "but these coots grabbed the wrong un'. Ogilvie'll be after you if he has to run a tunnel clear down here, water jacketed for coolin' and timbered with asbestos logs."

"What is this?" demanded Hazelton.

"It's Subterranea, the land under the land. The city of the granddaddies of all cave men. Accordin' to their story they been here too long to keep dates. They used to live in caves up on the surface and got way ahead of their times with gadgets of one kind or another. Sort of a scientific bunch. One of 'em found some kind of metal or alloy and made up one of these boring wagons such as you just came in.

Used to go explorin' far down into the innards of the earth."

Hazelton stared incredulously. Then he remembered that ancient peoples of South America, Asia and Egypt had done engineering feats beyond the reach of modern man. Secrets of science known in the old world had been forgotten under the rush of vandal savages. Why was it not feasible to believe something of the kind had been known on the western hemisphere and likewise lost?

"They tell a long-winded yarn of the coming of great mountains of ice and bitter cold. The fires their people built in their deepest caves and mines wouldn't keep 'em warm. Savage brutes of men, covered with hair and skins of wild animals, came swarmin' down ahead of the ice hills and killed a lot of 'em."

"Crude cavemen before the glacial advance," nodded Hazelton.

"This Peary of their times who went borin' to do his explorin' had found a big hollow bubble down here, miles below. He'd rigged it up with all kinds of gadgets, bein' more scientific than any of the rest, and had lived a year or more down here alone with his do-dingers and thingamajigs. When he heard the trouble up above, he offered to haul 'em down here and set up what you see."

At this juncture the grim seven interrupted, talking gruffly to the interpreter. He shrugged and explained.

"That's all the hist'ry for now. You," pointing at Hazelton and the girl, "come with me. The rest of you unlucky stiffs go with the guards. You get the five years at hard labor, boys. And take it from me, you better do what you're told. Them chambers of horror on earth we heard so much about was tame to what they do to a worker here what don't toe the mark."

Hazelton looked at him expectantly. "You get the detail as interpreter, for they figger you look to be smartest. The girl—well, they got something special for her."

His eyes hardened. His jaw muscles flexed.

"Listen, Miss Ogilvie, it ain't goin' to be no bed of roses for you, but you got one consolatin' thought. You'll likely be the only earth woman who'll have to go through with it—and you'll be maybe savin' a lot of daddies and husbands from bein' snatched away from wives and kiddies in the years to come."

She looked at him with eyes that pleaded for an explanation, but he looked away.

"Only I'm sorry it got to be an Ogilvie they picked. Your old man was the best super I ever had."

CHAPTER III

IN the days that followed Hazelton was the constant companion of the interpreter. They had an utter freedom, except for the locks, and were allowed to prowl everywhere, discuss anything, while the old man taught the younger the language of these odd creatures that controlled this city of wonders.

Hazelton learned that the marvel of the past had built up an impossible intricacy of machines. He had fired his mechanical mole with an atom engine, which produced power from an incredibly small amount of fuel, a mere handful sufficing for a trip of that boring engine to the earth's crust and back. Then he had learned how to break down the gases and earth about their sphere into elements, from which he could extract what was necessary to life.

Oxygen was manufactured steadily, as were all things else man needs.

The surplus gases were carefully drawn off, and the waste matter all reworked. For centuries the ball, reinforced by a thick layer of this hard alloy and securely braced against outward pressure, had continued its self-contained existence, the reproduction of life strictly limited, the whole city definitely as regimented as a bee hive.

Then, only a few years before, a slight increase in the heat of their walls had been noticed, in spite of the functioning of the thermostatic cooling device.* This was a real problem, for the many centuries of cave dwelling before they dipped into the center of the earth and the additional centuries of living in such a perfectly regulated atmosphere had taken from their skins the normal functions of perspiring and of heat regulation for their bodies. They were like cellar grown sprouts, so pale and unaccustomed to normal functions that sunlight or frost would kill them.

Meanwhile the inventive genius had lagged. Like so many other civilizations they had progressed far beyond their contemporaries and then halted. Fear gripped them. There seemed no solution to their plight. If they bored upward with their moles to the earth's surface, temperatures there doomed them, for they could live only at the sixty-eight degree level. On the other hand, the increasing heat, due to escaping lava pressed upward as they tapped the inner heat of the earth for their cooling systems, would soon kill them all unless workers could be found for the hot chambers where the cooling apparatus lay.

Part of the difficulty lay with the deterioration of the odd feathery cloaks

* The thermostatic coolers utilized the heat from the core of the earth to refrigerate to the desired temperature after the principle of a modern gas operated ice chest.—Ed.

Hazelton had already noticed. These were truly asbestos, but were hundreds of years old, since nobody had bothered to learn how to reproduce what seemed never to show signs of wear. But the cloaks had begun to disintegrate, and their wearers could not remain in the super-heated control rooms long enough to cut down the ever increasing and ever threatening beat.

While they were yet able to drive their own workers into the chamber in relays to keep the interior of Subterranea cool, somebody had suggested a return to the earth's surface to capture some of the beastial cavemen who had invaded their domains with the coming of the ice. These creatures should be able to work in the alternating heat and cold of the control chambers where Subterraneans collapsed quickly under the dual strain.

Then began the series of raids that Ogilvie had noted. Instead of prehistoric cave dwellers they caught coal miners, men admirably adapted to their needs, being accustomed to much sweating below in the mines and cold on the surface of the earth. But even these hardy miners could survive only five years in those damnable control rooms, where the heat from the vitals of the earth poured up to be changed into frigid cold to pour through the channels in the metal shell that insulated Subterranea from the heat without.

Then Hazelton brought himself to ask the question he had dared not voice. "What about Miss Ogilvie? What are they going to do with her?"

THE interpreter shook his head and looked away.

"Lookin' at it one way, it's hard on her," he said gruffly. "I'm glad she ain't nothin' to me."

Hazelton jerked about at him.

"Well, she's something to me. She's the woman I love." Then at the incredulous stare, "Oh, I know it has come over me fast. I'd no business to let it, with her father so much better off than I and all. But the way she stood up to me, the way she took—all this—"

He broke off and shrugged, staring moodily. Then he braced himself. "Come on, let's have it. What's in store for her?"

The interpreter chewed hard, shook his head, seemed groping for words.

"The way I look at it," he grunted, "we gotta be practical. It ain't right the way they grab off poor devils like us from the mines and drag us down here to wear out. What they ought to do is develop their own workin' class by—well, by cross breedin'."

Hazelton gasped and took a half step forward, as if to throttle him for the suggestion. His fingers worked spasmodically, and every muscle in his body was tense as he fought for self control to keep from killing the monster who could suggest such a horror. The memory of those horrible faces and those oddly transparent bodies made him shudder convulsively. He did not wonder that Doake had told her to commit suicide at the earliest possible moment.

Union with those horrid things would be nightmarish enough, but the thought of bearing children by them to be made into mechanical toilers in that hell of alternating temperature extremes was beyond endurance.

The voice went on. "They figure they'll get another strain from you and some of their women. Then they'll cross the two lines and develop all the workers they want, scientifically bred to heat and cold resistance and assuring them workers forever.

"Never," screamed Hazelton, beside himself with horror. "I'll have no part

in it, and neither will she. She's mine. Destiny brought us together. We'll die before we'll submit."

That wry grin that was devoid of mirth twisted the seamed face again. A gleam of the prematurely departed youth flickered in those aged eyes for an instant as if in respect of his defiance and then went out.

"They got ways of persuadin' stubborn customers," he sighed.

Hazelton gripped him by the arm, his eyes alight.

"Listen," he begged, "do something for us, will you? You haven't much longer to live. You can't lose anything."

The shell of a man nodded disdainfully. "Not long. Five months at the most. For every day over six months I take learnin' you to savvy their lingo I get a night of torture. It's a lot easier to die on time."

"Then do this for me—for us."

"What?"

"Tell them I'm an inventor. Tell them I could make all kinds of things they'll need. Tell them I'll do it if they'll spare both of us that breeding."

A wild hope was already forming in his brain. He had delved into every nook and cranny of the marvelous few acres, had uncovered long forgotten cubbyholes and studied blueprints so old that they all but crumbled to dust in his hands. Many a feverish hour he had spent in copying down formulae evolved by some long dead brain and neglected by degenerating descendants.

Again that jaw swung rhythmically at the cud. Again those sagged shoulders shrugged.

"They're pretty much set on this cross breedin'. Figure they need some new blood."

"Try it," begged Hazelton.

"You know the risk you're runnin'? These critters ain't sympathetic, you

gotta remember. They'll likely promise you anything, and hold up delivery. They c'n torture you into doin' anything."

"I've got to take that chance. Try it."

IN his prowlings he had discovered where the girl was held captive. When his companion slept he had often slipped away to spend a few stolen moments at her window. Slowly the horror designed for her had dawned on him as he pieced together the propaganda talks she had reported. With a skilful knowledge of psychoanalysis and a resulting ability to create such fixations as they desired in a mind, they were slowly working upon her with diabolical cunning to prepare her for what they planned.

But their propaganda, he felt sure, was like that of earthlings, fit for the consumption of those who prepared it but certain to bring startlingly undesired reactions in such a mind as hers.

Luckily the process of preparing her for the anticipated ordeal was to be protracted. If his vaguely forming plan could work he might save her yet.

His companion came back at last, bringing the solemn seven, whom Hazelton had long since learned were the council in complete control of all life within the sphere.

"The prisoner is our slave," announced the head councillor with a frown. "Why should we bargain with slaves?"

"Because," smiled Hazelton disarmingly, "the mind is a delicate mechanism. When it is disturbed it will not function. Torture would throw it out of gear, drive schemes away. Nothing but contentment and happiness must prevail for the inventor. Worry, fear, anxiety, anything but peace will ruin his dreams and hopes and plans."

The seven deliberated. It was evident that they saw some virtue in new inventions. It was evident too that his poise and his ready answers had pleased them. He was quickest of all earth men they had known in learning their language, which argued favorably for his genius.

"Then plans for breeding you with our girls must be delayed?"

"Must be put off forever. Also plans for anything of the sort with Miss Ogilvie."

The seven exchanged glances. Hazelton caught the significance of those flickering eyes.

"And she must come to visit me every day in my work shop. I must know that she is happy, for I have chosen her to be my wife."

Frowns replaced the smiles.

"Are we to be dictated to by a slave?" demanded one.

"Are our plans, so near fruition, to be upset by the whim of a mere earthling?" demanded another.

"No," said Hazelton, drawing himself up proudly, "by an inventor, by one who knows how to use the science that you sluggards have not bothered to master. By one who can reproduce your invaluable asbestos cloaks, who can improve your cooling system, who can insulate your little world against ever increasing temperatures."

He was bluffing in large part, but they could not tell. He could see the repression muscles leap under their skin, could see the mad pulse of their blood foretelling a surge of anger, but they could not read his poker countenance. They stared and stared.

Finally the head councillor spoke.

"By special decree of the council you shall be given permission to work at will in the laboratories, using such materials as you desire. The girl shall come to spend some of each day with

you. The council especially wants to see new cloaks of asbestos, as you call them. The need is great. You could do Subterranea — and yourself — no greater service than to create such cloaks."

CHAPTER IV

Hazelton Makes His Plans

HOPE shone in Hazelton's eyes. Following instructions he had copied from mildewed blueprints, he had opened a disused injector and drawn a rush of ore into the sphere from a length of indestructible pipe that led some miles to a supply. Already the machines were at work lacerating the fibrous material according to specifications.

He looked up at the sound of footsteps and smiled cheerfully. The girl only stared at him out of a face that mirrored stark tragedy.

"You can smile?" she asked. "In the face of all this horror? Knowing—knowing what they have asked of me?"

His face darkened. He leaped up to embrace her, but she recoiled.

"But I'm buying you immunity from their devilish plans with this work. That's why I'm happy."

"But there can be no immunity. They're tricking you. They'll squeeze you dry and then—go right ahead with it."

He dropped his eyes as if to study the plans. He could not risk telling her, arousing her hopes. It would be too cruel. Besides, she might let it slip somehow.

"You're a traitor to decency if you do one thing to keep their crazy world from melting around their heads," she insisted. "They're not human. They are animal-like, all but devoid of emotions. I—I can't stand it! They're driving

me mad with their insidious suggestions that it would be an honor to bear them their ghastly children—the monsters!”

He lifted his suffering face.

“I’ll save you that,” he said. “I promise you. Whatever else happens, I’ll save you that. Death would be better?”

“A thousand times. I—you see—I’m—I’m in love.”

His heart stopped for an instant. A cold chill seemed to freeze him. He could not force himself to raise his eyes to hers lest the misery in his own tell her what a fool he had been to allow himself to fall in love with her.

“I—er—can imagine how you feel then. I—er—you see, Miss Ogilvie, I’ve—well, I’m that way myself about a certain young lady.”

He could hear her breath stop, could feel her eyes on him. He felt the blood drain from his face, then come flooding back.

“So I can understand,” he went on, grimly determined to see it through. “It would be bad enough normally, but when you’re in love—”

There was silence for a long time. When she answered finally, in a mere whisper, that eager vibrancy was gone from her voice as if he had choked off her last bit of hope instead of holding her out a sure escape. He understood the change to be from a consideration of the impossibility of ever returning to that lover she had left on the surface of the earth.

“Then you’ll assure me a way out—if the worst comes to the worst?”

He nodded miserably. Deep within him he hoped, for her sake, that his plans might meet with no obstacle. For himself, now that he knew she was already in love, the future was suddenly hopelessly bleak.

Silently they watched while the shredding machine spewed out its con-

tents. He rushed the mass to the other processes with rising hopes. So far everything was working as he had planned. No inquisitive Subterranean had come to watch or snoop.

He opened another carefully charted intake pipe and carefully examined the ore that came oozing into the bin. He grinned as he thought of what he was planning. But the grin was bleak compared to the broad smile he had known before the girl had spoken, and his heart was heavy. For his own part he could cheerfully have utilized that secret he had once been tempted to work, the secret that would cut through the dome of their retreat and flood their city with molten lava and crushing earth from without. But he must save her, if possible, even if it must be for another’s arms.

The limited quantity of ore that he had drawn from the first intake chute went on through process after process. Gradually it began to show promise, so that he thrilled at the fluffy quality that he saw developing under the series of treatments. Gradually the material began to show definite promise of far surpassing in lightness and beauty the tattered garments that the Subterraneans were forced to don whenever coming in contact with the slightest change in temperature.

Finally he had a completed cape to show the unreconciled Miss Ogilvie. She forgot its beauty in the significance of what it might mean.

“Don’t you see, Mister Hazelton,” she implored, “that you’re perpetuating this horrible nightmare by giving them these capes to prolong their existence indefinitely? Without them, they must soon die off, for the old ones are growing less and less effective.”

He toyed with the luxuriant material, letting it whisper through his fingers. His eyes were on those machines, each

working on the substitute ore that he was anxiously putting through a similar process. He could see that he would have to do a world of experimenting before he could be assured his plan would work.

"I'm doing this to save you," he tried to explain. "If I can perfect their apparatus and their protection sufficiently they won't need to breed their special workers."

She shook her head, her haunted eyes on his face.

"No matter what you do, they're going through with their plans for—for their hybrids, as they call them. They concede that temperature changes may be wise for the future. If they can breed adjustable skins and sweat pores into their future race, they think they will be safer from extinction."

Still he could not bring himself to tell her of his wild dream. So much might happen. His experiments might not jell. The Subterraneans might learn of his attempts at duplicity.

"I've got to go on," he said doggedly, avoiding her eyes. "I've got to believe they're sincere. It is all that will save my sanity—work and faith."

SHE looked at him pityingly as he bent to examine a fresh batch of the lacerated fibers. She imagined that he meant he must go insane thinking of the sweetheart he had left on the earth's crust and of what might be happening to her during his absence. She almost put out a soft hand to brush the tumbled locks out of his feverish and worried eyes, but restrained herself, afraid that he would guess of her hopeless love for him.

"This is going to take work," he said grimly. "Look at these colors. No more alike than—boy, what a job I've got ahead of me!"

Grimly he plunged into it. His inter-

preter, granted a stay of life that some of the learner's time might be spent in the laboratory work, fumed and wheedled as he stole hour after hour for the work he felt he must rush to completion.

"They'll be givin' me mine," he kept reminding Hazelton. "This is one place where a teacher's got to deliver or they give him the works. You gotta learn or I go to the torture chambers soon."

Hazelton lifted sunken eyes that stared out of a gaunt outline of a face. His gaze was fanatic as it bored into the prematurely aged eyes.

"Listen, I'm trying to save the lot of us," he whispered hoarsely. "I think I've got something. If I can match these colors—"

The interpreter grinned and spat disdainfully. His thick fingers rubbed the fluffy material speculatively. To all intents and purposes this was a duplicate of the first robe made, but the shade was different and the feel lighter.

"If you're riggin' these to deceive them Subterraneans you're wastin' time on color and finger feelin'. They got no delicate nerves 'cause they ain't got skin. Nor their eyes ain't up to shades, neither. Ain't you noted the colors're kind of drab around here? The whole lot of 'em is color blind. Get the shades somewhere near alike and you'll fool 'em on color every time."

Hazelton's heart leaped. "You're sure of that?"

"Positively. No feel in the finger ends and no eye for color."

Hazelton turned madly to his machines, speeding them up. His hopes sang within him. Yard after yard of the feathery material came from the finishing machines, was spread out on the tables. Cutting machines sliced it. Needles flashed to sew it to the desired cape style. When Miss Ogilvie came for her daily visit he was madly sewing

away at the third garment.

"I AM making a hundred of these," he explained. "See any difference?"

"Of course. These two are nearly pure white. The other has a grey tinge. And these," rubbing the soft fiber between speculative thumb and finger, "are slightly softer to the touch. They're not exactly the same material?"

"No, but I'm trying to palm them off as the same. If I get away with it, we might put an end to all this," waving his hand about him at the weird world.

"I don't understand."

Her voice was so questioning that he suddenly felt he must confide in her. Half his exhaustion was due to trying to bottle up his emotions, to trying to harbor hopes and fears without talking the possibilities over with anyone.

"That one is real asbestos, like their original cloaks. These are made of a highly inflammable, non-heat resisting fiber. I'm hoping they'll test only one cloak. Then I'll try to swap them—the rest of the batch for our freedom. With only one effective cloak, they can not carry on with their own workers."

She reached for needle and thread and sat down beside him. Her fingers whipped the soft material together with rapid stitches.

"I'm with you," she whispered. "I know it's a desperate chance we're taking, and I doubt if they'll set us free, but we might annihilate them and end their raids on humanity by tricking them."

The pile of feathery cloaks grew. Day after day they kept the machines turning out the material and their needles whipping it into garments. Finally Hazelton sighed with satisfaction at the long rack of splendid cloaks.

"I'm going to try one on Orno today," he whispered. "He's on duty in

the heat chamber tonight when they change from hot to cold. I'll rig him up in the new asbestos cloak and watch how he reacts."

The experiment was undertaken with reluctance by Orno, the particular foreman in charge of the control chambers that evening. Hazelton went along, clad in a second cloak aware that he could stand the temperature changes because of his body heat radiation, although wearing a cloak that had no effect on heat or cold.

Orno stepped gingerly through the air lock into the highly complicated control room. Still doubting the efficacy of the newly constructed suit, since it was almost a religious belief in Subterranea that these miracles had been done by supernatural assistance, he watched the thermometer rise and rise.

Hazelton felt the sweat pop from him and was thankful for the concealing folds of the utterly useless cloak as the heat swam at them in shimmering waves that turned the control room into an inferno. All around them toiling bodies of the miners and muckers who had been brought in the last raids, gleamed nakedly, sweat poring from every pore. Their haggard eyes gleamed viciously at the two cloaked figures so completely muffled that they could not recognize Hazelton.

Perhaps it was as well for their misery had congealed into an intense hatred for the investigator they felt had been responsible for their being captured. Although they were chained in such a fashion that they could do little to harm him, their bitterness was so intense that they might have ripped free from their chains and braved the probability of torturing punishments to get at him.

"This is wonderful," screamed Orno above the roar of the hissing steam that came charging up from the core of the

earth through the ancient pipes that had been designed to bring it to their sphere. "Not one bit of heat reaches me. I hope it is the same with the cold."

Hazelton nodded his confidence and waited.

THE moment came at last when it was necessary to change over to the cold. The heat was clamped down. Tubes and channels were locked shut. The mighty paddles drove the cooling mixture to the fans that would waft the frigid air through the tunnels in the metallic shell.

The control room chilled swiftly. Frost formed around the mixer. Particles of ice danced in the air, where the steam of a few minutes previous was frozen before it could congeal. Pipes of dull dark metal took on a feathery whiteness as the chamber turned into a fairyland of frozen beauty, while the toilers jerked on their garments and moaned with the ache of the chill.

Hazelton had to bite his lips to keep his teeth from chattering. The sweat was freezing inside his useless cloak. It took every bit of his muscular control to keep from shaking with a chill.

"This is wonderful," shouted the delighted Orno. "This cloak is so much better than the other. I could stay here all day."

Hazelton edged toward the lock, feeling that a few more minutes must give him pneumonia. He called out above the whirr of the fans and the beat of the mixer.

"I want to see the council. Come and give them a report."

They slipped off their cloaks as they emerged into the even temperature of the sphere. Hazelton threw both over his arm to keep Orno from seeing how cold he was.

He noted how the dogs on the lock

worked, making a careful note. If his bartering failed with the council, he had a desperate plan to try.

On their way in quest of the councilors they passed the slave quarters near the lock that gave entrance to the control rooms. The workers off duty lifted and clanked their heavy chains as they recognized him, hurling vile epithets at the man they felt had brought half of them into this nightmare existence.

"They love you, eh?" grunted Orno. "Beasts! Is it any wonder we had a low estimate of your people?"

"These are only the lowest type of workers," explained Hazelton. "Miss Ogilvie and I belong to the brain workers."

Orno nodded. "That is why we hope for a splendid union of you two with our people. We have much in common. If we can only develop your heat metabolism our race will be perfect."

Hazelton said nothing in reply. The casual way that Orno had mentioned a subject he believed discarded gave him food for despair. Undoubtedly the girl was right. They had no intention of exempting her from their hideous cross breeding plans.

He was still grim when he faced the seven. Their exclamations of delight at the efficiency of his suit, as reported by Orno, left him cold.

"Gentlemen," he said at last, weighing his every word, "I have a proposition to lay before you. I wish to return to the earth's surface. So does Miss Ogilvie, and so do these others who came with me. I have made for you a full hundred of these cloaks. Your people, protected by their insulation, can return to operating the control room. They can even install additional machinery to guard against any undue changes in exterior temperatures if the earth about you grows hotter or colder. All of these things I have learned are

collected where they can be studied and your problems solved.

"In exchange I ask but one thing. You can dispense with us. Your plan for cross breeding is unnecessary now, with the improvements you can make. I request that you return us to the surface of the earth, or to the mine from which we were taken."

There was a murmur from the sedate seven. He could almost feel animosity pumping from them.

"Request refused," snapped the chief councillor. "The earth's crust must never know of our existence. We have taken unusual precautions to keep word of us from leaking. We want no raids from them."

It was useless for Hazelton to plead that the people above knew nothing of the secrets of the mechanical mole; could not manufacture the remarkably hard metal that enabled the sharp rotating screw to bore its way through the hardest rock. They were adamant. There was to be no returning.

"And the council had furthermore decreed," went on the chief councillor, "that you and the woman be subjected to breeding. Tomorrow you will report to meet the young women chosen for the experiment."

Hazelton went white with horror, knowing how Miss Ogilvie would feel. His eyes blazed with indignation. He wheeled and started toward his living quarters.

"I regret your decision," he said harshly. "I believe you will regret it too. I refuse to take the responsibility for what will happen. Do you want to exchange the cloaks, Orno?"

The councillors nodded the foreman leave to go. They hurried off, Hazelton tossing him the fake cloak while he clung to the one of asbestos.

They made the change swiftly, the Subterraneans who brought the older,

worn asbestos garments exclaiming delightedly when they saw the newer, more luxuriant ones. Like chattering children they filed away, while Hazelton hastily heaved the discarded cloaks into the shredder and chopped them into bits, mixing them with great quantities of useless ore to destroy their effectiveness if any of the Subterraneans tried to rebuild them.

Then he folded the real asbestos garment into a neat bundle and hurried away with it to the girl's quarters.

CHAPTER V

An Attempt at Escape

IT was the rest hour when all of Subterranea took a siesta. Being perfect totalitarians, they all obeyed the dictates. The great sphere slept except for the restless slaves clanking their chains in their misery in the quarters, and the sobbing girl crying her heart out in her own room over the horror that she had just learned confronted her on the morrow.

Hazelton called to her softly. In an instant she was at his side.

"You've brought it? The poison? The means of ending it all?"

"Not exactly. I've brought hope. We're making a desperate attempt to escape. Put this on. As soon as you see or hear escaping steam, make your way to the outside lock, the one where the mole is kept, the one where we entered. You know where it is?"

She nodded, unable to speak in her excitement. Then she managed, "If—if nobody—stops me."

"They won't. They'll not be able to stop you. The heat'll get them."

He turned and slid toward that smaller lock that led to the control chambers. The slaves saw him coming and lurched up to renew their abuses, but he fran-

tically signed to them to be still. Then he fearlessly stepped nearer and whispered his hopes.

"I know the secrets of the whole of this crazy place. I am going to make a stab at fighting out. I'll knock off your chains and take you with me, if you'll help."

They grouped about him, red eyes filled suddenly with hope instead of despair.

"But you've got to help. We must work fast. I want you to free the boys inside, while I turn on the heat. Then we'll rush the outer lock in a unit, seize the mole, and shoot for the surface."

"As easy as that," nodded a sarcastic miner who might have been a heckler jeering a peace advocate in a mine strike. "And what about them devils with their paralyzin' guns?"

"You'll be gettin' us nothin' but more torture," protested a poor wretch who looked as if he was already breaking under the cruelties of their masters.

Hazelton saw that their courage had been sapped, that they had lost confidence in everything but the retribution that the Subterraneans might heap on them.

"They'll be unable to reach us because of the heat. I'm turning steam into their world. We can claw through it, but they'll die."

"Not in them asbestos suits. Wasn't that devil of an Orno just telling us there'd be no more loafin' in the control rooms now you've made 'em newer and better asbestos jackets?"

Then he told them that every asbestos cloak except one had been destroyed, that the one remaining was in the hands of Miss Ogilvie, who would wear it in the dash for safety. The Subterraneans depending on his cloaks for safety would be cooked alive in the steam.

They took hope and urged him to

knock off their chains. He leaped to obey, for the siesta was fast dwindling away and they must strike at once, lest the trickery of the substituted cloaks be discovered during the next shift.

The lock opened to his whirling of the intricate array of wheels. Without bothering to clamp the outer door shut, he ripped open the inner and plunged into the control rooms.

"Boys," he called in an exulting voice, "I have come to attempt an out for us all. The others will knock off your chains while I step up the temperature inside. Their asbestos coats are gone. I'm turning on the heat. As soon as it gets warm enough inside to stupefy them, we'll make for the outer lock and the space mole. But listen to me and do just as I say. We can't afford to have a miss. This is our one chance."

HE turned to the pulsing tube that led down into the infernal heat of the earth's laval core. For untold centuries that seemingly indestructible tube that the originator of the whole scheme had installed by some secret hydraulic drilling method had been bringing the desired heat into that chamber to convert it into the cooling influence needed in that little world. Eagerly he reached for the valve wheel. Grimly he turned it farther and farther past the safety mark.

Steam hissed and roared and billowed about them. The fans sucked it into yawning tunnels, sent it swirling madly through channels usually reserved for cold drafts.

In the billowing steam the miners tore the last of their numbers free. Then they crammed into the lock, impatient to dash for the ship.

Hazelton restrained them with difficulty. "Remember those paralyzing guns," he kept urging them as he looked through the window in the chamber at

the thermometer inside the sphere.

A scream ripped from the throat of some Subterranean aroused from sleep by the heat. It was picked up and echoed by a score of throats. He saw figures struggling into the fake asbestos cloaks as the temperature mounted swiftly. Behind them the hissing roar of the steam seemed to increase, although he had dogged the inner door shut.

The weird natives of the place were in torment. The thermometer reached eighty-five and mounted swiftly. With a single leap it touched ninety, jumped on toward a hundred.

Hazelton called out with alarm. It was no longer a question of holding his men. The Subterraneans were groveling everywhere in torment. Miss Ogilvie was fleeing toward that outer lock, unrecognizable in her asbestos cloak.

Too late, he realized his error. There had been no need to send that live steam into the shell. The mere cutting off of the cooling blasts would have sufficed to heat the sphere to a degree unbearable to the natives, since the outer earth immediately about it was terrifically hot. Now he had endangered their chances of escape by shooting the temperature up at an alarming rate.

"Come on, boys. Make a dash for it."

They sped with one accord toward the big lock where that mole awaited them. The air within the sphere was already so hot that they were gasping with panting lungs before their dash. Half a dozen forms crumpled before they reached that huddled figure in the asbestos cloak at the door of the chamber.

"Bring 'em in," screamed Hazelton, "while I get the door open."

He set the wheels to spinning. It seemed an eternity of blistering heat before the massive door swung and the

survivors staggered weakly through. Hazelton, clamping the great door shut desperately, saw the dome glowing red hot and beginning to bulge inward under the heat and pressure from without. Then he dogged the door shut, just as a tumbling destruction poured through the domed roof with a mighty, crashing and rendering of the intricate scientific machinery, while the great control room lifted on the wings of an explosion.

The men with him cowered in horror as the lock shook with the upheaval beyond its walls. But it was constructed of even thicker metal than the main sphere, since it was subjected to so much greater variations of temperature when the moles were run in and out. Although its walls were blistering hot and beginning to glow a dull cherry red in spots, it was still intact.

"Listen," screamed Hazelton through the pandemonium of terror that seized the men scrambling madly to get into the mole, "this thing can't carry us all back to the earth's surface unless many of you are numbed unconscious by that spray. We'll all die unless some of you allow me to spray you into that trance that requires no oxygen."

They demurred and grumbled. The cherry spots on the walls spread alarmingly. The heat grew terrific.

"You've got to, or we're all lost," he pleaded. "Those dogs won't work and the door will expand beyond opening. We'll cook where we are in another fifteen minutes."

That panicked them. They agreed to cram into the passenger space and to subject themselves to the spray. All piled into the mole, crowding it tightly. Hazelton reached for the spray gun and shot the freezing liquid over them.

AS soon as they were silenced, he leaped out, borrowing the cloak

from the girl, and spun the wheels that operated the dogs. As the ponderous door opened, a gush of hot earth pushed inward, but he leaped for the mole door, clamped it shut after him, and passed the cloak to the girl.

In another instant he was at the controls.

He had studied them carefully when he came upon the blueprints among the other papers. Being of an intensely mechanical turn of mind, he had rehearsed and rehearsed just what he should do.

He started the atomic engine with the pressure of a button, jerked the reverse lever for the vanes. The mole began to back slowly, met the slowly entering wall of hot earth from beyond the door, and gripped steadily into it.

Back and back and back they ground. He reached for the tilt bar and dropped the rear end of the churning chamber. Then he lifted the nose higher, until the gravity spirit level proclaimed that they were headed straight up. Slowly he eased her out of reverse and, grinding the gears but slightly in shifting, started her to clawing upward.

He waited fearfully, watching the altimeter scale, aware that he had overloaded the engine in his eagerness to save every man. The auger vanes roared and snarled as they cut into the rock. The cuttings grated and ground past the shell toward the rear as the irresistible drive of those moving vanes carried it back and packed it firmly behind them. Slowly, steadily, the heavy ship was rising through solid rock.

Up and up and up they went. The human freight in the rear compartment was like a collection of grim wax figures, staring out of eyes that could move from heads and bodies utterly devoid of motion.

He knew but one fear, yet that one mounted as they bored steadily up-

ward. The inventor of the mechanical mole had perfected a means of increasing the surface of those whirling vanes so that they would grip water with sufficient power to lift the contraption to the surface of even the deepest part of the ocean and propel it to shore across untold miles. But he had evidently not followed his specifications in perfecting the device, for the control for increasing the function of those vanes was not as pictured on the original plans. If they came to the surface at the bottom of some lake, river, or sea, he would not be able to propel their heavy craft through water.

The worry grew into a mania with him as the hours passed. He recalled how much of the earth's surface is covered with water. It would certainly be a horrible thing to get so near to safety, only to die because of that change the inventor had made in his controls when it came to actual construction.

They were beyond the intense heat now and churning upward through the oil-bearing sands. The sucking slump and slide of the sands made progress slow, but the speed of the vanes was stepped up to maximum, and they continued to climb.

Experimenting by tilting their nose a trifle, he learned that their speed upward increased if they went at a slant instead of trying to rise perpendicularly. Accordingly he shot upward at an acute angle.

"We're going to make it," the girl screamed at him exultantly. "Won't the blue sky look good?"

He managed a grin and a nod. He wasn't so sure about seeing that sky. They might never see anything outside their mole except the murky water visible through that forward window.

The slow hours churned past with nothing to mark them but the variety in the sound of their progress which was

determined by the material they met and passed through.

Up and up and up, hoping, fearing, dreading, exulting. As the girl's assurance mounted and the altimeter finally proclaimed they were almost at sea level, his foreboding increased. At any moment he expected to hear the swish and gurgle of water, to see that steadily mounting needle hover and stand still.

He breathed easier when they reached sea level. The greatest part of the earth's water lay under that. But there were still rivers, ponds, and lakes. A mere duck pond, filled with soft ooze, might be enough to trap them.

Panic gripped him so that he overlooked the obvious possibility of reversing and grinding along at another angle to rise elsewhere. His mind, already frantic from the haste and horror and exhaustion of their imprisonment, could not function normally. The one obsession mastered him, that they must die so near freedom if they struck water.

IT came at last. They had slipped into an ever softening earth that barely swished past them. The earth grew softer, more liquid. Their progress slowed. They churned in a silt, barely holding their own as the silt grew thinner to the churn of those gripping vanes that brought water down upon them from above.

He frantically stepped up the speed. The vanes raced madly. The mole lifted a few feet.

"Open the window cover and see if our nose is out," he gasped. "I can't seem to make another foot."

Fearfully she slid back the metal curtain that protected the thick glass. There was nothing visible over them.

He touched a button and sent the powerful searchlight beam into that murk. She saw only muddy water pour-

ing at them in response to the pull of those madly churning vanes.

He touched her. She turned to look at him.

"There's an escape lock that accommodates one person," he called. "If you can swim, you'd better try it. I'll hold her here while you get ready. When I flash a warning, you open the outer lock, I'll shut off the whirring of the vanes, and you slip through."

"What about you?"

"I'll stay and shoot the others out—if they can swim."

"But in the end?"

"I'm afraid we can't all make it. But I'll be happy—knowing I brought you back to your man. You see—there isn't any girl up here for me."

Her eyes danced with pleasure. She kissed him suddenly, full on the mouth.

"Then we send out the men—and die together. I can't swim," she lied as he started to protest, "and besides I want to die with the man I love—if he can't escape."

He made no further protest. One by one they aroused the numbed men, explained what was required of them, and sent them out through the escape chamber. Each time the mole sank as the vanes stopped revolving, but each time the mole worked up. Finally, when they lifted to release the last miner, they snagged on a stump as they started to descend.

"Quick," called Hazelton, as he set the pumps to blowing the chamber. "Squeeze into there before she tears away from the stump and sinks. Maybe we can make it."

"Not unless you come too," she said stubbornly.

He kissed her pouting mouth and squeezed after her into the narrow compartment. They opened the outer door. Chill water flooded in at them. In an-

other instant he had shoved her out ahead of him and was swimming up toward the surface, carrying her with him.

It was dusk on the small lake and chill. But the first of the miners to escape had reached shore and dismantled an old rail fence to shunt floating bars out to the others as they came shooting up. The last of the escaping men had explained that the others might follow, so the little pond bobbed with long floating chunks of split rails to buoy them.

They had barely reached the shore when a surge in the center of the pond attracted their attention, followed by a series of gas bubbles that came up and burst with the stench of rotting vegetation from the muck at the bottom of the pond.

"There goes the proof of our experience," said Hazelton, aware that the weight of the mole had torn it from the stump and allowed it to sink back into the fathomless muck. "But I'm just as well satisfied. For my part I can't forget that place too soon."

The girl huddled close to him as they built a fire with matches one of the men carried in a water-tight case. Her face turned up to his, her eyes shining.

"There is just one thing about it all I want to remember," she whispered, shuddering in recollection of the horror, then beaming again.

She did not need to tell him that that was the way he had rescued them, for her eyes were telling him that in a language that he did not need an interpreter to learn.

THE END

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YEAR

BY
E AND O
BINDER

In an instant of time
a whole year vanished from the
minds of men, and chaos ruled the world

CHAPTER I

Amnesia?

"AUGUST 10th, 1940."

Larry Benton stared at the newspaper's dateline in utter amazement. *1940!* It must be a misprint, since it was only August 10th, 1939.

Rapidly he turned the pages and found them all labeled with the erroneous date. How could they make such a glaring mistake? Being a newspaperman himself, it struck him as incomprehensible, since no man-made institution watched dates as closely as the newspapers, the soul of whose wares was time. A simple slip of 1940 for 1939 on one page would be understandable, but to find it on every page!

And his own newspaper, the *Times-Star*! He felt his face actually burning with shame.

A queer shock went through him as he turned his eyes from the paper. He looked down at the cloud packs over which he was flying, and suddenly realized he was in an airliner. The muffled sound of laboring propellers came to his ears. His glance next took in the cabin and its nine other passengers.

He suppressed a gasp.

To save his soul, he couldn't remember boarding the plane! In fact, he couldn't remember a thing in connection

with his journey!

Why was he in the plane? Where was he going? What did it all mean?

Amnesia!

The word struck him like a blow in the face. That was the only explanation. He was one of those unfortunate amnesia victims you read about—unknowing of his present actions. Yet he knew who he was—or did he?—

Hastily, he drew his wallet from his coat pocket and looked at his presscard. With some relief he saw the name "Lawrence Benton." Furthermore, he remembered everything quite clearly—up to August 10, 1939. From there on, his mind was a blank.

His eye caught the newspaper dateline again.

August 10, 1940! His memory had skipped a whole year! With a hollow feeling, he read some of the headlines. New Chicago Subway Opened. It had been only half done, the last he, Larry Benton, remembered! Second Year of New York World's Fair Doing Land-slide Business. Benton hadn't even known they planned a second year of operation! Gigantic Crime Wave Still Sweeping World. This, to Benton, was a total stunning surprise.

Benton groaned. Obviously, he had known of those events, had lived through that period. But by some queer

twist of amnesia, he had lost all memory of it.

And he didn't even know where he was going, or what assignment he was on for his newspaper. Or, if he was returning from one, what assignment had he been on?

Surreptitiously, he glanced at the man in the opposite aisle seat. He tried to screw up enough courage to ask him where the airliner would land, but shrank from the prospect of a chilling suspicious glare. Perhaps it would be better to wait for the arrival at the airport, wherever it would be. Then he could call his paper, by long distance if necessary, and find out a few facts. Thank God he remembered quite clearly that the central offices of the *Times-Star* were in Chicago. The chief editor's name was James Woodley. He should remember that, having worked under him for five years, which preceded the strange missing year in his memory.

Benton felt a little heartened now. Things wouldn't be so bad. He'd get along, using common sense. Perhaps soon his amnesia would clear up. A whimsical thought struck him—for all he knew, he might have gotten a raise in the past year. That would be a pleasant surprise.

Alicia!

Her name suddenly flashed across his mind. Alicia Deane! What about her? He'd met her some three months prior to the blank period in his memory. Good Lord! On the night of August 10th, 1939, he had been with her and they had quarreled bitterly. That was the last he could remember of that, too. Had they made up—or not?

Benton hoped they had. And had seen much of each other in the past year of which he knew nothing. If, on the other hand, she were out of his life since that night—he squirmed at the oppressive thought. Quite frankly, he loved her.

No senses denying that.

This wasn't going to be much fun, this amnesia. Benton saw that quite clearly. After landing—whether it was Washington, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Los Angeles, or Timbuctoo—he'd try to tie up as many threads as he could, for his own peace of mind.

He settled himself back with a philosophical shrug.

He might as well enjoy the trip till the landing. Vaguely, he noticed now that the other passengers were acting strangely. Their heads were twisting, probably as Benton's had a few moments before.

He sat up, wonderingly. The man across the aisle stared at him. The look in his eye was that of a lost being.

Then the door to the pilot's front compartment opened. The co-pilot stepped in, staring at the passengers as though he had never seen them before.

"Can—can anyone tell me where we're going?" he asked stupidly.

IN a flash, Benton realized that not he alone suffered a blank mind. They had all been stricken by the amnesia.

The pilot didn't know where he was piloting the ship. The stewardess, who came forward dumbly, was equally bewildered. And all the passengers remembered nothing of having taken this airliner. They had all gone through the same experience, undoubtedly, that Benton had before. The rude awakening to their surroundings—the hopeless straining to remember—the sick feeling of destination unknown.

An instant air of panic charged the cabin, with the co-pilot's thoughtless question. A woman passenger screamed and fainted. Several of the men bounced to their feet, looking around wildly, as though for escape. One man yelled something about parachutes. A confused babble rose from trembling lips.

Benton leaped to his feet, aware that the situation might lead to serious trouble.

"Quiet!" he yelled out. "There's nothing to get panicky about. Calm down, all of you. The plane is still going, and we're in no physical danger. There are a hundred airports where we can land. Sit back and we'll figure out what's to be done."

The passengers sat back obediently, calmed by his sensible words. Benton shoved the stewardess forward, to take care of the woman who had fainted. Then he turned to the co-pilot.

"You dumb ape!" he hissed in low, angered tones. "You nearly started a riot!"

"But I—I *don't* know where we're going!" insisted the flyer. "Nor does the chief pilot. He sent me out here. We don't even remember starting this run, or flying this kind of ship before. The last I remember is flying mail to New Orleans!"

"What date and year was that?" asked Benton curiously.

"August 10th, 1939."

"Okay," returned the reporter. "Now go back to your compartment and look for your sailing papers. It'll give the destination. All ships carry them."

"Say, that's right," admitted the flyer sheepishly. "We were so mixed up over this, we didn't—" He was already diving back to his fore cabin.

He reappeared a moment later.

"Chicago!" he announced. "We came from Washington. We're scheduled to land at the Cicero Airport in an hour."

"All right, hop to it," Benton nodded. "I don't think you've forgotten how to fly a ship."

"Chicago? Chicago?"

The passengers were looking dumbly at one another. None remembered how or why they had boarded an airliner flying from Washington to Chicago.

But relieved at the thought of reaching solid ground soon, with phones to use, they settled back quietly.

Benton pondered the phenomenon as objectively as he could.

Somehow, a year of memory had escaped all these people and himself, as though it had been ripped out of their minds. Amnesia? No, that medical term for a rather rare mental condition couldn't cover this event. It was something a little more significant, more mysterious. Just what, would remain to be seen.

He had a queer thought. Had *time* slipped a cog, perhaps? . . .

CHAPTER II

One Whole Year—Gone!

THE airliner came down smoothly on the concrete runway of the Cicero Airport, Chicago.

The passengers piled out and hurried for the phone booths within the station, to call up friends or relatives and orientate themselves. Benton paused at a newsstand and glanced at all the newspaper's datelines before satisfied. They were all dated August 10th, 1940. All the magazines, too. No smallest doubt remained that it was actually that day and year.

His instincts of observation always on the alert, Benton noticed immediately that the station's attendants all looked dazed, though they carried on their duties automatically.

The phenomenon had not been localized on the plane! All these people had also been afflicted! Benton was a little stunned. It was becoming a bigger thing every minute.

He had to wait in line to use a public phone. People came out of booths more bewildered than when they had gone in. There was a long delay before Benton,

at last unhooking a phone, was connected with the office of the *Times-Star*. The phone service seemed partly disorganized. But finally Jim Woodley's gruff voice growled in harried tones from the receiver.

"Hello, chief. This is Larry, back in Chicago." Benton went on rapidly. "But what was I in Washington for? What was my assignment?"

"God only knows!" replied the editor wearily. "I don't. I didn't know you'd left. I can't remember a thing."

"Jeepers!" The reporter almost bit his tongue. "Has everybody in the country lost his memory?"

"Country?" echoed Woodley scornfully. "In the *world*! We've had cables from our men all over creation, including Shanghai. *It's a universal mass amnesia!*"

Benton gasped. It took him about a minute to take that in, while the hairs on the back of his neck stood out. Then he spoke into the phone again.

"Well, I'm at your service, chief. What'll I do?"

"Don't ask me!" snapped Woodley. "For all I know, I fired you last year. If I did, I showed some sense. I'm half crazy trying to figure out what to print in tonight's edition. If we use any fresh copy, assuming we get any, nobody will know what it's all about. Nobody remembers a thing since August 10th, 1939 of last year. The world's gone screwy. I think we'll shut down the plant today at least. Come down to the office, Larry, and help us get organized. If I did fire you, you're temporarily rehired."

He hung up.

Turning from the phone, Benton stood for a moment in whirling thought.

The twelve-month *a m n e s i a* had struck everywhere, all over Earth, like a lightning bolt. Like a frightful pandemic. This was the biggest thing of all

time. His imagination shrank before the thought of what it would mean—the whole world plunged into temporary disorganization.

He met the first signs of it as he left the airport.

The driver of the taxi he hailed seemed unable for a moment to place the street of the address he gave. But finally he did, with a dazed gesture. Cruising along, Benton stared out at the world that had lost its memory for a year.

Everywhere, people were dazed. Those who had moved within the past year didn't know where they now lived. Many found themselves in a city different from the one they last been in. Traffic was gnarled. Motorists had forgotten their destinations and slowed down to hesitant crawls.

Benton shook his head.

The first few hours wouldn't be so bad. Things would carry along under their own momentum for a while. But soon the complex web of civilization would clog up. Schedules, machines and all the intricate movement of daily life would be thrown off balance. No one would remember what he had last been doing. If the phenomenon kept up, it would take days, perhaps weeks, for the world to get back toward normal. Benton could foresee that.

But what had *caused* this breathtaking event?

His reportorial instinct demanded a reason for it. But there he was stumped. All he knew was that in some manner a period of time was lost to the world's collective memory. In a way, it was like a short-circuit of memory.

Or the thought struck him forcibly again—*of time!*

He instantly thought of a name—Dr. Paul Balstine. A scientist, he had last year announced a new theory of time. Benton had interviewed him at that

time, since he was good copy, without absorbing much of the new concept. It had had something to do with time being a field of force, whatever that would mean. But he might be the man to explain this mystery.

Already visioning a scoop, Benton made a mental note to see the scientist at the earliest opportunity.

Only two things mattered, to Larry Benton, even on the eve of this sweeping upset of the normal. One was his newspaper. Benton was newspaperman to the core, and already looked upon the event as a story—a great, unprecedented story. His blood began to race a little with the thought of busy days ahead, chronicling this tremendous, stirring drama on the broad stage of life.

The other thing, his only concession to the personal, was—Alicia Deane.

THE taxi came to a halt, with squealing brakes, before the rooming house in which Benton lived, in a bachelor apartment. Telling the driver to wait, the reporter carried his bag to the second floor. He couldn't find his key, but surprisingly, the door was open.

Furthermore, the room was occupied by another man who stared at the intrusion!

Benton mumbled an apology and found out from the housekeeper that he had moved from there a few weeks before! Her records gave a forwarding address that he next visited. But he had no key for the new apartment, and the landlady didn't know him from Adam!

Cursing softly, Benton headed for the offices of the *Times-Star*. He would have to register at a hotel for the day, till he could get himself straightened out. But on the way he suddenly thought again of Alicia Deane, and decided to stop off at her aunt's place, with whom she lived.

She met him at the door, as attractive

as ever, he thought, with her golden hair, oval face, and tall graceful figure.

"Larry!" she exclaimed. He wasn't sure if her tones were glad or just surprised. "Come in. I'm so confused."

"So is everybody," vouched Benton, following her to the parlor. "It's all over the world."

"All over the world!" echoed the girl, her eyes widening. "What does it mean?"

Benton shook his head.

"I don't know. I just came back from Washington, but I haven't the least idea what I was there for. It seems to be a mass amnesia."

"I found myself out shopping, when it happened, two hours ago," Alicia said, her tones mystified. "I couldn't remember when I had gone out, or what I wanted to buy. At first I thought it was just myself, but then I saw other people stop, and look bewildered. A woman ahead of me screamed and fainted. Two cars ran into one another, in the street. It was like a nightmare for a moment." She shuddered. "It still is!"

Benton wanted to get up and comfort her. She looked so frightened and in need of it.

"I hurried home," she continued. "Aunt was half hysterical. She's in her room now, in bed from the shock. And just a few minutes ago I noticed I don't live here anymore! None of my clothes are here. I must have moved in the past year. I'm so confused I can't think straight. The last I can remember is the evening of August 10th, 1939—"

Benton looked at her quickly, and realized she must be thinking of the same thing. In this very room, on that evening, they had quarreled. It stood out freshly in their minds, as the last common memory they had. "It was something silly," murmured Benton, as though to shove the matter aside.

"You were trying to choose my com-

pany for me," the girl said, her eyes flashing. "You objected to the fact that I had dates with other men!"

"Well, I still think—" began Benton angrily, then grinned. "Good Lord, Alicia, no use carrying on the quarrel now. We must have made up, *after* August 10th, 1939!"

"Maybe we didn't!" retorted the girl coldly.

"Well, anyway, let's call it quits now," he pursued.

"I can't forget some of the things you said," she responded, more icily still.

"But Alicia—"

"Oh, get out!" She was suddenly crying, and ran from the room.

BENTON, feeling rather bleak, arose and left. He tried to feel angry with her, but couldn't. He put it down as jumpy nerves on her part, occasioned by the recent upsetting event. When she was calmer sometime, he'd straighten things out with her—he hoped.

A half hour later he registered at a hotel near the *Times-Star* office. The harried clerk didn't know which rooms were vacant till he had looked up the records, item by item. In the dining room, where Benton went after a shower, a waitress wasn't sure if they had any baked beans left and had to inquire in the kitchen.

The common knowledge of three hours before was a complete blank, in all minds. Benton reflected it would be amusing if it weren't so serious.

Jim Woodley, chief editor of the *Times-Star*, greeted him surily. Hair rumpled, fat face sweaty, his usual composure was gone.

"I'm at the verge of a nervous breakdown!" he moaned, rumpling his hair further. "I can't put out an evening edition. Half the press crew left, and the next shift didn't show up. Forgot

they work here, I guess. First time the *Times-Star* has missed an edition in 26 years!"

His face looked genuinely pained. It was hard to see such a tradition broken.

"But we'll get out a morning edition," he promised grimly, "if I have to run the presses myself!"

"Count on me for any help, chief," offered Benton earnestly. "But what was I in Washington for? Any idea yet?"

"Yes. I looked in the files, after you called. You were there to cover the National Anti-Crime Conference. The president was ready to put the army and navy on the job. It seems there's been a big crime wave, beside which the Prohibition Era was Sunday school."

He groaned dismally. "Another big story ruined, since the public doesn't remember a thing about it. I only got it out of the back files, myself. Well, anyway"—he sighed—"it stops the crime wave itself."

"I wonder," remarked Benton.

He turned to snap on the small desk radio. Only two of Chicago's stations were on the air. The rest had shut down. The two operating were serving alternate organ music and flashes. Obviously, they had been forced to shelve their scheduled programs, what with scripts and rehearsals forgotten.

The news flashes gave a panoramic picture of civilization tied in a knot that would take some time to unwind. Humanity had not realized before how much depended on what was carried in the mind. Memory linked each day to the one before—and yesterday was a blank. Confusion reared over the world like a brooding monster.

But, as Benton had half expected, a wave of crime was also reported, particularly robberies on a large scale. The criminal element was quick to take advantage of circumstances, while law and

order lay more or less helpless. Police were barely able to cope with the other problems that had arisen in overwhelming number.

"Guess I was wrong," Woodley grunted. "Benton—"

But the tall reporter was already out of earshot, striding out of the room.

HE went to the floor below, where the back copies of the *Times-Star* were kept on file. Starting with August 10th, 1939, he rapidly scanned the daily front-page headlines. No sense, he told himself, in not knowing what had been going on in the past year. It seemed like the events of another world, or like peering into a future that hadn't really happened.

Some things startled him.

During the fall of 1939, war had nearly broken out again in Europe, but had been averted with another rearrangement of boundaries. A lone flyer had bettered Howard Hughes' round-the-world record by five hours. Fall election results in America were interesting. Benton saw the names of officials who had taken office recently and wondered if they themselves knew it.

But in the main, the undercurrent of life had gone on the same. There were the usual divorces, labor disputes, political wranglings, murders, and such.

And then, suddenly, the story seemed unreal, beginning a few months before. The headlines were filled with an abrupt, devastating crime-wave, in Europe and America. Daring robberies and cold-blooded murders filled the news. It seemed that the underworld had erupted, in a few mad months, into a campaign of unparalleled depredation, as though at a signal.

Though the world remembered nothing of it, now, it must have been a miniature reign of terror. The Anti-Crime Conference, newly created, from which

Benton had been returning that morning, indicated to what extent the nation had been alarmed.

As though at a signal!

That phrase had stuck in his mind. Benton jumped up suddenly and ran to Woodley's office.

"Chief!" he exclaimed. "Maybe the crime-wave links up to this mass-amnesia!"

"What!" The editor was astonished.

"Look," continued the reporter, the words tumbling out. "For two months a gigantic crime-wave sweeps the civilized world. Then, just as government is about to step in and clean up, the year of forgetfulness comes. A year is *stolen* out of men's minds. It's a perfect cover-up, don't you see? The machinery of law stops. Justice is suspended. Detectives, policemen, witnesses, have *forgotten*. There are records, yes, but it'll take weeks or months to follow them up. By then, the criminals will have covered up their trails completely. At one stroke, the greatest crime-wave in history has become a complete success!"

Woodley was staring, open-mouthed.

"What are you hinting at?" he demanded. "That some story-book master mind *caused* this amnesia?" He snorted. "That's more preposterous than the amnesia itself."

"You have to explain the incredible with the incredible," insisted Benton. "If you call it coincidence, you're stretching a point too. I believe human agency did it—a scientific criminal leader one jump ahead of other scientists. It fits too perfectly to be ignored. What do you think, chief?"

"I think you're crazy," returned Woodley flatly. He waved a hand in dismissal. "Roll up your sleeves and get to work here. I'm short-handed."

"I'm going out, chief," said Benton firmly, suddenly making up his mind,

"to see if I can get any leads on my idea."

Woodley glared, in no mood to be crossed.

"If you do, you're fired!" he snapped.

"All right, I'm fired."

Benton stalked out.

CHAPTER III

Dr. Balstine

OUTSIDE, Larry Benton thought himself a fool.

His idea was fantastic. Still, what was more fantastic than the mass amnesia? Yet that had happened. He set his lips. He'd follow his idea through. First of all, Dr. Balstine.

Finding no press-car available down below, Benton hailed a taxi. An hour later, after winning through numerous traffic snarls, he got out at the scientist's suburban home, a plain little house set back among tall trees. There was a brick building in back that might be his laboratory, surrounded by a high board fence.

The scientist himself answered the door, a short plump person with amazingly bright little eyes. When Benton announced himself, Dr. Balstine shook his head.

"No interview," he snapped nervously. "I couldn't help you if I wanted to. I've lost my memory." His voice shook a little. "Amnesia, I suppose. I'm waiting for it to go."

"That's what I came to talk to you about," said Benton quickly. "Have you any theory to explain why everyone has the same symptom?"

The little man stared.

"Everyone!" he reiterated.

Benton nodded.

"Seems to be a world-wide condition.

Four hours ago everyone lost the ability

to remember anything beyond August 10th, 1939." He glanced at the scientist curiously. "Didn't you know?"

"No!" exploded Dr. Balstine. Relief had stolen into his face. "I thought it was just myself. I've been alone all that time, worrying myself sick. Come in and tell me about it."

Excitement replaced the nervousness he had first betrayed.

Seated in the parlor, Benton explained what he knew. The scientist listened attentively, his eyes deeply thoughtful.

"It's all a crazy mystery," concluded the reporter. "It's hard to understand how a year of memory can be wiped out in every mind on earth."

"Biologically, it's impossible," stated the scientist. He paced the floor, frowning heavily. "The answer must be from an objective viewpoint. That is, that something *outside* of our minds produced the effect. Obviously, we lived through that period from August 10th, 1939, to August 10th, 1940. Life went on as it always had. We ate, slept, worked. I was looking over my notes before, trying to jog my memory, and saw that all had gone as it should, up till today."

His tones became eager. "In fact, I noticed that just a year ago, on July 11th, I obtained experimental proof of my time-field. I was going to announce it the following week!"

"Couldn't that have some tie-up?" asked Benton slowly. "I mean the time angle. After all, it's a period of *time* that was so strangely eliminated from our memories."

The scientist stopped stock still. His bright little eyes seemed to pierce through and through the reporter.

"Maybe you're right!" he whispered. "How much do you know about my time theory?"

"Very little," admitted Benton apol-

ogetically. He drew out a notebook and a stub of pencil, expectantly.

"Then listen." The scientist thought a moment before resuming. "The classical conception of Time is that it is a sort of fourth dimension along which all events slide. My theory of Time is that it is a *field* of force, like the gravity field around Earth, or a magnetic field around a magnet. That reduces it to a measurable force, and I've measured it.

"Like gravity, it is constant, unvarying. It is tremendously powerful. For instance, if you wanted to make the proverbial trip into the past or future, escaping the field"—he smiled—"you would need the energy given by the atomic disintegration of tons of matter. Just as, to escape gravity, you would have to burn tons of rocket fuel."

Benton nodded slowly, seeing the point.

"We can skip that. But can you dovetail your theory in any way with this mass amnesia?" he queried.

THE scientist paced up and down silently for a while.

"I think I can," he spoke presently. "Going into the past and future are fantastic speculation, but there's another angle to the phenomenon of Time. Have you ever heard of 'physiological Time'?"

Benton shook his head.

"In brief, it's an independent time-sense that humans, and possibly all living creatures have. That is, despite clocks, we often feel Time slowed or speeded. To a soon-to-be father, pacing in a hospital, Time seems to drag endlessly. Or to anyone waiting for something to happen. On the other hand, Time often seems to fly, especially when we're enjoying ourselves. An hour to the former seems like years, because his mind is stimulated, abnormally active.

An hour to the latter seems like a minute, because he is calm and untroubled. And this is due, I believe, to the existence of secondary Time-fields in our brains. When these conflict with the stable Time-field of the universe, we're out of tune, temporarily."

Benton was frowning thoughtfully.

"I don't see—" he began, but the scientist interrupted.

"I'm just trying to show how easy it is for our physiological Time-sense and the standard Time-field of the universe to be out of phase. The Time-field can't be changed, as I stated. But something could easily affect *our own* mind-clocks, throwing them so far off normal that we are out of tune with the Time-field by a full year!"

"But *what*?" demanded Benton. "It's never happened before."

Dr. Balstine made a gesture signifying he had no answer.

"There is a first time for everything," he said tritely. "I've explained as much as I can." His bright eyes became reflective. "I'm going to try to find out just what did it. Something has twisted our Time-sense, short-circuited it, from today back to August 10th of last year. And with it, all memory. It's the most amazing phenomenon of nature in the annals of science!"

Benton wet his lips and decided it was time to bring out his secret thought.

"Of nature?" he repeated. "Could it in any way have been brought about by a *human* agency?"

The scientist laughed and gasped at the same time.

"You might as well look for a human agency behind an earthquake, young man," he scoffed. "I think I know more about Time than any man living today, yet I wouldn't have the least idea how to produce this phenomenon. No, that's too incredible to even think about."

Dr. Balstine's tones were so final that

Benton closed his notebook and made his departure, discouraged.

He could write up the physiological Time-sense theory as a scoop for the *Times-Star*, however. That is, he wondered dryly, if anybody cared. The reading public might be too preoccupied with its dilemma to care about pretty scientific speeches. Then he suddenly remembered that he had been fired, anyway, so what did it matter?

BENTON had trouble getting back to his hotel.

No taxis were in sight. He took a street-car crowded with dazed, unhappy creatures, only to have it eventually stop behind a long line of stalled cars. The city's transportation system, depending on timed schedules that motormen had forgotten, was rapidly becoming paralyzed. It could be no different in all the other large cities of earth.

He began walking.

He noticed that most shops had closed. People were in no mood to shop. The problem faced them all of reorganizing lives that had suddenly stopped, and begun again, twelve months later—on the verge of the unknown.

A couple passed, and by the strange way they looked at the baby the man carried, Benton surmised the addition to their family was a complete surprise to them.

It was a mad world, one in which shock piled on shock, to each individual. With an unconscious sense of humor, a street beggar was whining. "I can't remember when I've eaten last, mister—"

Benton gave him a quarter.

He luckily snared a taxi for part of the way, paying an exorbitant price to the avaricious driver, and arrived at the *Times-Star* office thankfully.

He strode into Woodley's office and displayed his notebook.

"Scoop for the *Times-Star*," he announced blandly. "All about our physiological Time-sense, by Dr. Paul Balthine."

The editor looked up quizzically.

"I thought I fired you!"

"Well?"

"All right, get to work, you long-legged baboon," growled Woodley. "Did you give up on your master-mind theory?"

"Not exactly," shrugged Benton. "I'm going to keep my eyes peeled for further leads."

He rolled up his sleeves and began working.

A sense of duty had prompted him to swallow his pride and come back. He couldn't let the *Times-Star* down now, when it needed him. He worked till four in the morning, along with most of the loyal staff, trying to put out a coherent edition. It would hit the stands at nine in the morning. Woodley had applied sheer genius in filling out the space not occupied by the usual advertisements and spot-news of citywide conditions. He had had his rewrite men go through the files and give a resume of the past year's happenings.

Helping in this, Benton felt as though he were reviewing some period in the far past, like in Roman times. Or as though some highly imaginative author had written a parody of his times. Especially the crime-wave.

The more he thought of it, the more he was convinced that it was too much of a coincidence to be followed by the year of amnesia.

At four A.M., dog weary, Benton dragged himself to his hotel room. He couldn't remember when he had slept last, but it felt like a week. He had probably slaved on the Washington assignment. His last waking thought was of Alicia Deane, and whether she would continue to hold a grudge because of

that quarrel of a year ago. Sometimes women were funny creatures.

He was awakened at nine by a phone call.

Woodley, back at his desk, wanted him over, with a busy day ahead for all. Growling that he'd be right over, Benton shaved and dressed. He felt peculiar, rather light-headed. Had yesterday been a bad dream? His thoughts flew back, but stopped abruptly with the "awakening" aboard the liner. Beyond that, his memory was still an aching, uncanny blank.

Momentarily rebellious, he strove to bring back some of that missing year of remembrance. He thought till he perspired. He tried to vision himself boarding the airliner, at Washington, but couldn't. What had he done the day before? Interviewed a Congressman, perhaps, or taken notes at the Conference, or played poker with some of the boys?

But nothing struck a responsive chord within his straining mind. And all the days before that, 365 of them, were equally empty, non-existent.

All over the world, people must be getting up and trying to remember, hoping the phenomenon had gone. Millions of people must be finding their lives and affairs so tangled that it would take them weeks to get straightened out. Two billion people without an iota of consciousness of the past year! What a shambles the world would be for a while!

At a restaurant, Benton ordered ham and eggs, but was told he couldn't have eggs. Somebody had forgotten to deliver them that morning. At the office a red-eyed Woodley set him to work re-writing what reports the news-agencies had been able to glean.

In general, the world's affairs had ground to a virtual halt. Business was stagnant, factories closed. Wall Street

was in a panic. The suicide rate had increased. Ships at sea were heading for the nearest ports. In diplomatic circles, pandemonium reigned, with countries unaware of their present relationships.

Benton grinned as he read of the usual troop movements in Europe becoming so tangled that they were all withdrawn.

It wasn't holocaust, in the sense that world-wide earthquakes or war would have been. It was simply a quiet breaking down of civilization's daily intricacies. But the effects were far-reaching and troublous.

Already the bigger cities were faced with the looming problem of food shortage, with train and truck schedules badly disturbed. Emergency measures would probably be required.

Benton was most concerned, however, with the continuing crime-wave. Systematic looting was going on in all big cities. The criminal element was filling its pockets, while law enforcement agencies lay befuddled. Some of the biggest banks and vaults were victims, in daring daylight raids. Civilization would find itself considerably poorer, when order had been again instituted. And there would be little hope of tracking down the criminals, in the confusion.

There must be a master-mind behind this, Benton told himself for the hundredth time, no matter how melodramatic it sounded.

CHAPTER IV

The Hat with a Metal Band

BENTON started as someone touched his elbow. It was Woodley, looking rather thoughtful.

"I just noticed," he said, "in looking over your Washington report, that

you'd had a hot tip that the big-shot behind the crime wave was in Chicago! It seems the whole thing was organized by some one—"

"Who?" yelled Benton, instantly alert.

Woodley shook his head. "You didn't get that. Just an underworld grapevine rumor that headquarters for the crime-wave were in Chicago—"

"Didn't I tell you?" interrupted Benton. "There is a master-mind behind this, who organized the crime-wave and the mass amnesia!"

"Don't try to tie up the two things," barked Woodley skeptically. "All I see in this—"

"Is your nose!"

They glared at each other. But Benton's glare suddenly changed to a stare, as he looked past the editor's head, through the open windows of the office.

"Look!" he cried. "The bank across the street is being raided!"

They ran to the window and stared down at the street scene:

A big powerful car stood at the curb, motor running. Two masked men armed with guns were on the sidewalk, on guard. The few pedestrians in that block were scurrying away like rabbits. A traffic policeman a block away was running up, tugging at his gun.

Benton took the scene in at a glance, and then dashed away, flying down the steps three at a time. He had no foolish notions of being a hero and stopping their bold robbery. He had no gun in the first place. But he did have a vague plan of following them, in a press car, and seeing where the trail led—for a possible scoop.

He arrived in the building's foyer just in time to see the final act.

Three masked men ran out of the bank, lugging sacks that bulged. The policeman running up began firing. It was foolish bravery. A return salvo

from the bandits stopped him in his tracks, and he fell. But his last shot stretched one of the bandits on the sidewalk. His companions dragged him into the car and they roared away.

Another successful coup! Benton cursed to realize it had happened too quickly for him to follow.

He ran toward the bank, then, to see what the situation was inside. As he passed the hat lying on the sidewalk, that had fallen from the wounded bandit's head, he kicked at it with feeling.

He stopped in surprise.

He had hurt his toe in the act, and the hat had barely slid along a few feet, without losing shape. Benton picked it up and found it strangely heavy. Mystified, he pressed his fingers along the headband and felt a strip of metal.

A crowd began pressing up now, jabbering excitedly. Benton stepped away, with the hat. He wanted to try something. In the lobby of his own building, he put the hat on, taking off his own battered fedora.

As the bandit's hat slipped over his skull, he felt a queer shock. There was a moment of dizziness. Then, instantly, memory flooded back—all of it! The blank period in his mind vanished. He remembered everything from August 10th, 1939, to this day of August 11, 1940!

The hat, with its peculiar metal lining, somehow neutralized the amnesia!

HE took the hat off again, experimentally. There was a slight dizziness, a faint hum that seemed to leap into his brain, and again twelve months of his past life were a blank! He could remember nothing of it. Staring at the hat, he could only remember that he *had* remembered the blank period!

Benton leaped up the stairs, faster than he had come down.

Without a word, he jammed the hat

down on Woodley's head, and watched him. Woodley's face showed annoyance, surprise, and finally his lower jaw sagged as though it had unhinged.

"Why—why I can remember everything now!" he stammered. "Benton, you've got something here!"

"I'll say I have," the reporter agreed.

He leaned his tall body forward tensely. "This practically proves my contention, that the brain behind the crime-wave is the brain behind the amnesia! Somehow, he caused the amnesia. He distributed these hat-shields to his organization, so they would be in full command of themselves, while the rest of the world was in a fog. And this master-mind is somewhere in this city!"

"We've got to find him!" Woodley exclaimed. "Great scoop for the *Times-Star*. The world in the clutches of a fiend, a cold-blooded ringleader of crime, a Machiavelli—"

"You can call him names later, in the paper," interrupted Benton. "The thing is to find him. It still isn't easy. First, I'm going to show this hat to Dr. Balstine. Maybe he has some idea—"

The phone rang and Woodley handed the instrument to the reporter. "For you, Benton."

Alicia's voice greeted him, sending an answering throb through his veins.

"Larry? I want to see you. Can you come right over?"

"Sorry, Alicia," he returned, his mind filled with the revelation of the hat. "No time now. I'll see you when I can."

It gave him a thrill that she had called. Her voice had sounded forgiving and sweet. She was probably sorry for holding him off before, and wanted to make up. He'd turn her down for the time being, that was the way to handle her.

"But Larry, I—"

"No buts," he broke in, feeling he had this situation, at least, well in hand. "I'll

explain later."

He hung up, snatched the hat off Woodley's head and strode away. At the door he turned.

"Make a note, chief," he grinned. "You gave me a raise three months ago. Tomorrow's payday."

DRIVING a fast press car, Benton set a reckless pace for Dr. Balstine's home. He wore the shielding hat and reviewed the past year of his life, in his thoughts. Funny how much seemed crowded into it, when revealed all of a sudden like this. One thing stood out, however. Alicia Deane. The trivial quarrel had meant nothing, of course. They had seen more of each other after that. He grinned. She had even—

Benton snapped himself alert, nearly running into another car at the rate of sixty miles an hour. No time to think of those things now.

Arriving at the house, he slammed on the brakes, ran up the steps, and rang the bell impatiently.

The little scientist opened the door.

"Oh, Benton. Come in. I've been thinking over what you said about a human agency behind this—"

Without a word of explanation, the reporter slipped the weighted hat over Dr. Balstine's bald skull. He went through the same reactions Woodley had displayed, but recovered more quickly.

"A shield!" he cried excitedly, his blue eyes snapping. He examined it while Benton told of how he had found it.

"This is in effect," the scientist continued, "a condenser composed of two strips of aluminum and copper, with a thin layer of glass wool between. Any outside field of broadcast force, striking it, is shunted away, by being condensed between the strips. Thus the brain

wearing the hat is protected from whatever wave is producing the amnesia."

"But the question is—who's producing the wave?" cried Benton. "Can you track it down in any way, Dr. Balstine? I have good reason to believe the man behind all this is in Chicago!"

The scientist started a little.

He put the hat back on and sat for a moment quietly. His eyes narrowed, as he evidently reviewed something in his returned memory. By degrees his face became whiter and more dumbfounded. At the last, when a minute had gone by, his features were wildly perturbed.

"Dr. von Steeden!" he gasped. "We worked it out together, a year ago, from my theory—a type of wave that would depress the potential of physiological time in the mind. Good God! I'm responsible for this world-wide amnesia! *It's on my soul!*"

Benton shook the half hysterical man by the shoulders.

"Snap out of it and talk sense!" he demanded.

The little scientist took hold of himself.

"I published an article on my time-theory a year ago, but withheld the final formulae, realizing the danger—" He stopped and began again, frowning thoughtfully. "No. Now I remember! I wanted to build a wave-projector. A great plan had struck me. I could prevent the coming world war that festered in Europe! By wiping out memory, the warlords would be confused. Each time a so-called crisis arose, I would use the wave-projector, scattering the danger. Such was the great, blinding mission that I set my soul upon, with my discovery!"

Benton gasped. The little scientist had indeed conceived a stupendous thing, altruistic to the core. But, as with all such idealistic men, he had not foreseen the impracticable side of it. He

had staved off the latest European crisis, all right, but what more? How did the crime-wave tie in?

"This von Steeden," Benton asked. "What of him?"

Dr. Balstine's pinched face was a sickly grey.

"I'm trying to think it out," he cried nervously. "Von Steeden read my article, and looked me up. We developed the wave-projector together. We finished it a month ago. It's out there in my back yard, screened by trees!" He moaned. "I'd forgotten—forgotten it all!"

"Then let's turn it off!"

Benton jumped up, with this idea in mind.

CHAPTER V

The Amnesia Machine

"WAIT! Be seated, gentlemen!"

It was a new voice, from the doorway behind them.

A tall, grim-faced, hook-nosed man stood there, smiling mirthlessly. Larry Benton recognized him instantly as "Doctor" Mike Larnin, international underworld master-mind—clever, cunning, ruthless.

"Dr. von Steeden!" gasped the scientist. "We must turn off our wave-projector! We've made a mistake—"

"Sit down!" repeated the newcomer.

Benton sat down and pulled the scientist down with him. Two men had appeared silently, one in the doorway opposite, the other at the window of the sun-porch. They were armed thugs.

"Now let me explain," continued Mike Larnin. He added softly, "You'll both be—as we say—rubbed out, when I'm through. You know too much already."

His accents were polished, in keeping with his groomed, respectable appear-

ance. More than any other underworld character, Mike Larnin was the closest approach to the scientific, brainy crime leader. He was, in effect, Benton's "master-mind" criminal.

He went on:

"Briefly, I saw the possibilities of your new discovery, Dr. Balstine, a year ago. I came to you as a fellow scientist—I've done considerable laboratory work in my unique career—to work out a projector. I pretended interest in your altruistic scheme of stopping war. But my real idea was this greatest of all crime coups!"

"I was so blind—blind!" groaned Dr. Balstine.

"When the wave-projector was completed," continued the master criminal, "we waited for the next European crisis. But in the meantime I had sent my signal around, through the vast organization I had formed. The Crime Wave

was launched. When government agencies were about to stamp down, I started the projector secretly, one night, while you slept."

He waved a hand.

"That was yesterday, August 10th, 1940. I set the dial back a year, to August 10th, 1939. It robbed you, Dr. Balstine, of all memory of our connection. You didn't even know of the projector in your back yard. Nor of the metal headband shield we devised. Now, unfortunately, through the meddling of this reporter, you've found out, and will have to go with him. I don't need you any more, since the projector works perfectly."



Alec
Gore

Larnin leered at them both, as though enjoying his cat-and-mouse role. Benton felt more sick than when the amnesia had first struck. They were trapped—doomed!

"The wave, as I foresaw," resumed the criminal leader, "made our coup an instant success. Like radio waves, this wave pulses over the whole earth—into every mind. The physiological Timesense in the mind is overthrown, set back a year. It doesn't take much power, since the mind-fields are very delicate. Less power, in fact, than any radio station. You'll remember we set up a radio-like aerial, Dr. Balstine. It looks no more than an amateur radio-sending outfit. No one will suspect it. I have diesel generators, and a supply of oil on hand, in case electricity fails, from the powerhouses."

"How long," asked Benton hoarsely, "are you going to keep the wave up?"

"About a month. In that time, my criminal organization will have just about all the ready cash, gold, jewels, and *lives* we planned to take." The man's cold eyes flashed fire. "The plunder of the world! I'll be the richest man alive when it's done! I'll get a portion of every haul, throughout the world. And"—grating laughter came from his lips—"this grand-scale emptying of the world's coffers will always be an 'unsolved' crime. For I've stolen time and memory with it!"

Benton bit his lip. He was right. When the time-wave was turned off, a month later, there would be no way of tracking down the criminals. There wouldn't be a single recorded clue!

Dr. Balstine's face was tortured. He had placed the blame on his own soul. He had made it possible for the lawless to empty the money-bags of earth.

THE master criminal straightened up. Stepping to the radio, he turned it

on. "I think you know what comes next!" he said suavely. He tuned organ music, and turned up the volume. His two men became alert, fingering their guns. Larnin held up his hand for the signal of death. . . .

Benton's hand had been creeping toward his pocket. He could feel the gun there, that he had brought along on a dim hunch, from Woodley's office. It was a hopeless chance, but he might plug one of them. He would try to get Larnin.

He flung himself forward, clutching for his gun.

A shot rang out—

Benton wondered why he wasn't hit. Good God—how long would it take him to get his hand out of his pocket? Ages seemed to pass, as in a nightmare.

More shots rang out. Still he wasn't hit!

He prayed for another second of this miracle as he brought up the gun he had finally jerked from his pocket. He leveled it for Larnin's chest.

He fired.

And then, suddenly, he realized he had shot a dead man!

Larnin had begun to fall a split second before, with a hole in his forehead! Benton sat up, dazed. Someone else had killed Larnin!

He looked around. Blue was a wonderful color, he thought, especially when it was the blue uniform of the police! Two of them were coming in from the sun-porch, stepping over the body of the thug they had shot. Two more came in from the front door, followed by rumple-haired Jim Woodley of the *Times-Star*. Benton never knew when he had been so glad to see his sour-faced chief.

"Just in time, it seems," the latter commented dryly. His eyes lighted up as he recognized the slain ringleader of crime on the floor.

"How did you happen to come here, with the cops, chief?" Benton asked the question that bewildered both himself and Dr. Balstine. The latter had sat through the shooting fray like a wooden image, too frightened to move.

"She did it," returned Woodley. "Called me on the phone right after you left. When I told her you'd gone looking for a criminal master-mind—which I thought was funny—she started in on me! What a tongue-lashing I got! Before I knew it I had called up the Chief of Police and requisitioned a squad. And here we are."

"She?" yelled Benton. "She who? You mean—"

A flying form came in the door and Benton stopped with his breath squeezed out, as she hugged him. The blue of Alicia Deane's eyes was even nicer than the police blue, he reflected.

He looked at her a moment. There was something he should remember about her. He had known it while wearing the shielding hat. But now he could only remember that he should remember something, not the thing itself!

"You love me!" he accused. "Let's get—"

He broke off and whirled, grasping Dr. Balstine's arm. "Go out and turn off that damned wave-projector," he said. "Take a couple of cops along in case any of Larnin's men are around."

He turned back to the girl. "—married!" he finished.

"No!" she said.

She drew three things out of her bag. "This key is the one for the new apartment you couldn't get in. This ring was at the jeweler's, to have another stone added after your pay-raise from the *Times-Star*. And this document is a marriage-license. I have all the proof. You can't get out of it, Larry Benton!"

"Out of what?" he gasped.

She looked up at him, smiling tenderly.

"We were married two months ago!"

A subtle hum that had existed in the air flicked out suddenly. A policeman had turned off the wave-projector, in back. Larry Benton remembered now. He bent to kiss his wife. He'd never forget again. He didn't want to.

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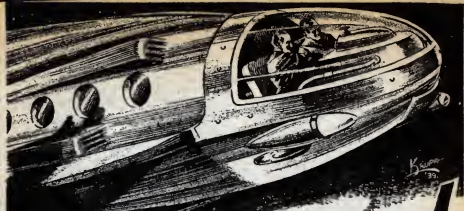


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"EBBTIDE" Jones and Stan Kendrick decided on a career of peaceful beachcombers of space. But instead they became involved in a weird plot of intrigue against the exiled ruler of Zandonia.





Whirlpool in Space

By MILES SHELTON

CHAPTER I

Lost: A Space Flivver

THE space liner zoomed off on schedule. Rocket blasts echoed over the reefs, sent a shiver to the dome of the lighthouse, shook Stan Kendrick out of his deep study. He sprang to a window to see a line of white smoke disappear into the morning sky.

"There she goes!" yelled "Ebbtide" Jones from his rocky perch near the water's edge.

Stan glanced down at his beach-comber friend with scorn. "Who cares?"

"I ain't talkin' about the gal," the lackadaisical Ebbtide whined, still gaz-

ing at the sky. "I know you don't give a hang about her, specially since she told you you was mossed over. I'm speakin' about the ship."

"She was a fool to sign up for that space hostess job," Stan muttered.

"I still say she's darned good lookin', Ebbtide shouted. "She'd make an awful perty wreck." A dubious look from Stan made him quickly add, "I'm talkin' about the ship. All I know about the gal's what you've told me. I've never saw her."

"You probably never will," Stan retorted. "Space navigation's too perilous. Needlessly so!" He heard Ebbtide cackle, barked at him, "What's

funny down there?"

"You."

"Why?"

"Cause you know enough about rock-
etin' to outfly the best of 'em, and yet
you stay anchored to your ivory tower
with your books and telescopes and
weather maps." Ebb cackled again.

"What's funny about that?" Stan de-
manded.

"Maybe the gal's right, you're mos-
sed over. If you ever once got bit by
a spunk fish, you'd tear out and show
the space friends how it's done. I'll bet
you'd make whipped cream out of the
Milky Way."

"Spunk fish!" Stan grunted. "Listen
who's talking! Ebb Jones, who never
did a thing in his life but sit on a rock
and wait for wreckage to blow in. It'd
take more than spunk to ever get *you*
on a space ship. It'd take twenty
stevedores and a hoist!"

SURPRISINGLY, two weeks later
Stan Kendrick and Ebbside Jones
took off in a space flivver. No one knew
where they went or why. Everyone who
knew either of them was amazed. Tele-
casts and newspapers broadcast the
story and the world talked about it. In
time the story took a tragic turn.

"NO WORD FROM MYSTERY
FLIERS."

Days, weeks passed. Not a hint of
them from incoming space liners.
Radiograms from Venus, Mars, and
more distant spheres brought no word.

The native fishermen and beach
combers shook their bewildered heads.
"Tain't natural," they said. "Watchin'
the sea was in Ebb's blood. Wherever
he's gone, he'll starve for lack of it.
Though most likely he's dead by now."

The excited talk at space ports and
in scientific circles gradually waned.
Stan's former astronomy professor con-
cluded the young scientist must have

gone on a fatal wild goose chase. "He
doubtless set out to find proof for one
of his original theories, which he con-
cocted by dozens while working at his
father's lighthouse, but I fear he was
too cocksure for his own good. I pre-
dict he'll never return."

At length observers came to the
tragic verdict, "Lost in Space," and that
was that. Most of the world forgot the
incident at once.

But there was a girl who remem-
bered, Susette Udell, a hostess on a
space liner. Also a pilot named Kiger.
However, neither of these ever shared
their private suspicions with anyone.

In the meantime the world turned its
attention to the most exciting news of
the moment, the overthrow of the Afri-
can king, Ajo Baustobub, Ruler of
Zandonia. The European Powers sliced
his kingdom over a conference table,
and invited him to flee. He packed his
treasure and flew to the United States.

Shortly after his arrival he rebuked
the European Powers with a startling
decision. Telecasts flashed, newspapers
blazed with bold headlines.

"ZANDONIAN MONARCH MAY
QUIT EARTH."

"KING AJO BOOKS PASSGE TO
VENUS."

It was the first time in history that an
ousted monarch broke off relations with
the earth.

"ZANDONIAN GEMS TO GO
WITH AJO."

The king's treasure was a matter of
much comment, for it included the well
known Zandonian Gems, one of the
rarest collections of precious stones in
the world. Protests sounded through-
out Europe against Ajo's taking these
valuables off the planet; but the United
States insisted it was his right, and even
offered to send official protection, which
the king politely refused. He had his
own cortege of Zandonian guardsmen

which would be quite enough.

The space liner he chartered was manned by a crew with an exceptional reputation for avoiding interplanetary pirates. Commanded by a pilot named Kiger. King Ajo interviewed Kiger and his crew, inspected the ship, and expressed his confidence that the trip would be successful. After meeting the new space hostess, a beautiful girl named Susette Udell, he added that he anticipated a pleasant voyage.

CHAPTER II

Bonanza in the Sky

WHEN Stan and Ebbside took off from the earth they knew exactly where they were going and had good reason for telling no one. Ebbside was so excited—and so airsick—he couldn't eat.

"We're ninety-eight hours out," said the young scientist, watching the dials eagerly. Soon he would either prove or disprove his hunch. "We're starting on our fifth day."

"Fifth day! Then why haven't we had five sunrises?" Ebbside had never been off the earth before. "We ain't had but one, and that was when we took off."

Stan laughed. "We're out in the open now, Ebbside. The sun doesn't have anything to rise over."

"Gosh, I forgot about that. But when's it goin' to be daylight? This velvety black is like midnight."

"It's daylight now on the sunny side of our flivver. Want to crawl out and see?"

"No, thanks!" the beach comber groaned. "Even if it was bright as day, I'd still be in the dark about everything. All this space looks just alike to me, and yet you claim we're on our way to a beach comber's paradise."

"Right!" said Stan. "And we'll drop

anchor before long if there's anything to anchor to. There should at least be a month's accumulation of meteorites and—"

He broke off short, stared at a point of light in the velvety black.

"What's up?" The beach comber hugged the walls as Stan checked the speed. "That star's gettin' brighter, ain't it?"

Stan adjusted the telescope. "That's no star. That's our whirlpool!"

Ebbside's eyes bulged. "No kiddin'!"

"Take a look through the telescope. What do you see?"

"Looks like a cluster of fruit under a spotlight—turnin' a little."

The scientist's eyes swept the dials, his hands flew over the controls. "What else, Ebbside?"

"A few grapes floatin' around free from the main ball of fruit."

"That's it, Ebbside, that's it!" He was so excited he could hardly speak. He retarded the ship as fast as he dared. "Take a good look, Ebbside. There's a sight no one has ever seen before. That's a gravitational eddy a rare thing, especially this close to solar space routes. We'll drift in as slow as we can." The bright spot grew.

"How do you know no one's seen it before?"

"Because it only formed last month. Three or four more months and it'll go away, but in the meantime it'll draw a lot of driftwood out of space, and if you don't have some pickings I miss my guess."

Ebbside blinked. In twenty years of beach combing he'd never struck a real bonanza. His mind swam with visions of the valuables so often lost in space. "You mean that everything that gets turned loose in space will wash into this whirlpool?"

"Within a limited radius—yes. This gravitational pocket is due to a tempor-

ary arrangement of heavenly bodies. I stumbled onto it when I did an original problem for my astronomy class. Look how it's turning! And see how easy those balls bump and jostle around. They'd be heavy on earth, but they must weigh almost nothing out here."

THE naked eye could now detect the clearly etched cluster of meteontes. Ebb's angular body braced against the telescope. Suddenly he emitted a yell that did justice to his deepest instinct.

"Hooray! A wreck!"

Stan gasped. "Are you sure?"

"As plain as day—a space ship—mangled as perty as you could ask for!"

Stan glanced through the telescope. "By George, you're right. Looks like a Venus-Mars mail boat—an old model—wedged in among a clump of meteorites. Good sign. That crate's probably been drifting in space for two or three years."

As the space flivver eased up toward the whirlpool, Ebb jumped about like a hooked eel, for more promising wreckage appeared.

"Talk about pickin's! You're a marvel, Stan, plowin' through all those leagues of space straight for this spot. How in the name of flyin' fish you knew this dizzy ball of rocks would be hangin' out here in the empty sky is more'n I can— Look, Stan, boxes of cargo scattered around! Say, for once we've struck a vein. Let's anchor down and nab the booty before—before someone comes along to nose us out." Ebb chilled a little with the thought.

"Don't worry. No one ever thinks of space combing. Pilots consider that anything tossed off a ship is lost for good—and ordinarily it is. So this is your own little monopoly, Ebb, and it may prove a pretty good thing before the whirlpool dissolves."

The ship nosed through the floating

balls of rock and ice that spiralled about the central cluster, and drew in close. The gravitational vortex was not strong enough to put the ship's counter motors to a test. The flivver sputtered around the meteoric cluster, the whole of which was no bigger than a battleship rolled into a ball.

A curious floating junkyard. Scraps of cast-off cargo, fuel containers, heaps of frozen waste jumbled together among rounded rocks of all sizes and tints. Two or three shapeless clumps that might have once been human bodies. Here and there unbroken packages that might contain gold or silver—or possibly soap. Ebttide's eyes glittered.

"It's all yours, pal," said Stan as they scrapped along the dark side of their little planet, flashing a spotlight. "My only object, you remember, was to prove that this existed and make some astronomical studies of it. The salvaging is yours. We'll hang on for ten weeks if all goes well, and then cart your treasure back to earth. Okey?"

"Okey."

"Good. Shall we tie up and step out?"

The ship came to rest on the bright face of the ball, rotated with it through the dark and back again by the time the men donned their space suits.

"I'm dizzy already," said Ebttied. "Maybe you'd better go first."

THEY passed through the air locks and Ebttide felt his clumsy oxygen suit puff out against the vacuum. His scared ejaculation reached Stan through earphones. So did every hard swallow. It was Ebttide's first taste of the void.

"What are your teeth chattering about?" Stan asked as they descended the ladder.

"Those rocks don't look none too solid."

"Right." Stan reached out to a boulder as big as a barrel. "Light as

a soap bubble." He gave it a push. It sailed out into space and floated back like a rubber balloon. Ebb was so surprised he let go the ladder and fell.

He never knew whether he fell up or down, but he fell toward the nearest rock, kicking and squirming. One kick against the rock and off he bounded into space a good two hundred feet. He described a hyperbola and floated back, screeching through the radio like a fire siren.

The two men spent an hour of rolling and creeping over their flimsy little sphere, returned to the ship optimistic. There was frozen food among the wreckage. Locomotion was not so perilous as they at first thought. You couldn't fall off without falling back. Best of all, there was plenty of combing to be done, and more expected; and plenty of astronomical data to gather.

"We'll be as snug here as Robinson Crusoe," Stan mused. He wished Susette Udell could see him now.

"It's all too good to be true," Ebb whined. "Someone's sure to come along and horn in on it."

"We won't let them," the scientist declared. "This little baby planet is ours, and I give you the privilege to name it."

So Ebbitide Jones fixed up a sign and Stan helped him plant it. A proud moment it was for the beach comber as he christened the heavenly body "Jones."

The weeks that followed proved so idyllic for both astronomer and salvager that the latter's instinctive trouble hunches came back. "It's too good to last. Are you sure no one knows about this spot but us?"

A tinge of worry showed in Stan Kendrick's strong face. "No. Other astronomers may figure it out, just as I did."

"Don't you say you figured it out for a class? What's to prevent them from

rocketin' up here?"

Stan got up from his calculating machine and paced the cabin floor. "Most of them didn't follow through on my calculations. Even the professor got hung up. But I remember there were two persons who caught the point. One was a girl I've mentioned—"

"The one who told you that you was —"

"Yes. The other was a stranger who dropped in to visit the class. I didn't like his looks or the way he took my stuff down in writing—so I stopped without actually mentioning the whirlpool—though he may have got it. Later I learned he was a space pilot named Kiger."

Ebbitide groaned. "We'll have him on our necks sooner or later, I feel it in my bones. These pickin's is too rich to go on undisturbed. Say—guess what floated in this mornin'!"

"What?"

"Three murdered Zandonian soldiers in the flashiest uniforms you ever saw!"

CHAPTER III

Zandonian Gems Adrift

THE handsome King Ajo Baustobub sat in his cabin looking at himself in the mirror. It was not his finely chiselled features nor his clear olive complexion—heritage from the best royal blood of Zandonia and Egypt—that impressed him; rather it was the bloodshot eyes, the pouches of sleepless vigilance beneath them. This voyage was terrifying.

Hourly his perils multiplied. Nine of his twelve guardsmen were gone. Murdered, according to Captain Kiger, during encounters with space pirates.

A knock sounded at his door.

"Who it is?"

"Miss Udell."

He turned the key cautiously. The

smartly uniformed hostess entered. As always, her beauty sent a thrill through his manly frame.

"With your permission," he said suavely, "I shall lock the door upon us."

"After all that's happened, I certainly don't blame you." The girl crossed to a luxurious chair, glanced about, let her eyes linger upon the three small trunks of glittering jewels which lay open on the floor.

"You're not afraid—being locked in this room with me?" he pursued.

"Why should I be? I'm simply an official on this liner."

"But you are also very beautiful," he persisted.

She smiled. "Your majesty is too well mannered to cause me any fear. Besides, I carry my own keys to every door."

The king raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Yes, of course." His eyes went to the jewels and back to the girl. He twitched uncomfortably.

"Moreover, I carry a gun," she added calmly. "One never knows what may happen on a space trip. You carry a gun too, I presume?"

"Yes, I—" he gestured toward the table where it lay, newly polished.

"Good. The way things are going, you may need it."

"Yes, I—" The king swallowed a lump of fear, inhaled a breath of boldness. He was a handsome figure in his white uniform, gold braided.

"You are in the greatest danger," the girl said quietly. "I hope you arrive at Venus in safety, but you must keep on your guard."

"Yes, I—" Ajo edged toward the table. "I didn't know when I booked passage that the pirates could be so bad."

Susette looked away for an instant, then faced him with the bombshell: "Do you realize that you are the only

one left on the ship now—except the crew?"

"But my three guardsmen—?"

"The last three are gone."

The king staggered. For a minute he was stupefied. He tried to speak in a controlled voice. "Murdered, of course, by space pirates—as the others were?"

Susette's lips twisted slightly. "So I was told."

Then anger burst like an explosion. The king's fist came down on the table, he snatched up his revolver, sprang toward the door. Susette barred the way. "Your pardon, Miss," he demanded coldly.

"Wait!" she cried. "What are you going to do?"

"Get to the bottom of this!" The bite of hate was in his words. "Face Captain Kiger! Demand to know who has murdered my men!"

"Then you think—"

"Someone on board has done it! I've kept watch every minute since we disposed of the last three bodies—and there has been no pirate ship. The pirates are on board, I tell you! Maybe Kiger is the pirate! Maybe you—" He cut short as the girl paled. "Anyway I'm going to find out!"

He struggled to tear her terrified body from the door.

"No!" she cried. "Don't go out there in a rage!"

He drew back and gazed at her. It was his policy never to trust a beautiful face, but the girl's alarm went through him. He calmed.

"Were the bodies of my last three heroes saved?"

"Yes," she answered. "They are lying in the corridor near the disposal chute, if you wish to see them."

"Perhaps later. For the present—no. Bring me cigarettes, please. And coffee."

She went out, through the corridor, through the dining room, to the grill.

KIGER set the ship's controls and gathered his crew of three into conference. They huddled over a breakfast table near the grill, but made no effort to conceal their words from Susette. She listened as she prepared coffee for the ship's only passenger.

"The coast's clear now," Kiger growled. "One more bullet will finish the job and we'll head for Mars, where those gems will bring the best price. Back home we'll chalk 'em up to space pirates."

One of the men nodded. Vietoff, first mate, grunted. "Where's the need to kill the king? Just go in and demand the ice! Four of us to one of him. He'll fork over."

"And then what comes of him?" Brewer asked.

"That's the point!" snapped Kiger. "We better make a clean job of it. It's safer. We could have pushed them all out, and saved our bullets, but we'd always worry about it, knowing that now and then some one gets lifted out of absolute zero and comes back to life."

Macey grumbled, "My guess is, we'll have trouble on our hands from Ajo. He's got a cold eye and a quick hand—and gun play is bad business in a space ship."

Kiger's heavy jaw jutted. "We can fix that." He called "Udell!"

Susette, starting through the doorway with a tray, turned.

"Come here with that coffee," her superior officer barked. "Here's the thing boys." He fished a small black pill from his pocket and dropped it into the cup. "That'll put him under for twenty-four hours. Before he comes to, we'll plug some lead in his belly and dump him. Simple as A B C. Okay,

sister, run along with that coffee. And then you'd better roll those last three 'heroes' on the trap. We don't want no tale tellers, living or dead."

"Or male or female!" Brewer added, as the girl went out of hearing.

Macey seized on the point. "It's time we knew where the girl stands, Kiger. She's damned independent, if you ask me."

"You're jittery, Macey," the pilot growled. "She stands with us. She's stood by without a murmur while we put the works on twelve guardsmen. She'll never talk."

"The way to be sure," said Vietoff, "is to give her a cut of the swag."

"Cut, hell" Macey cried. "It's hard enough to cut three chests four ways, let alone five."

"Aw, you make me sick," Kiger snarled.

"Yeah? Maybe you've got a crush on the girl," Macey muttered.

"Maybe I have!" Kiger snapped. For an instant his mind jumped back to a vague impression that bothered him—the impression that he had seen the girl somewhere before she came aboard his ship. He threw off the thought and faced his three men. "Go get some sleep while you've got the chance," he ordered.

Though it revolted her, Susette rolled the bodies onto the automatic disposal trap with dispatch, for now she burned with purpose. She reentered the royal cabin. King Ajo had finished his coffee and was already in a heavy stupor.

"His highness may not appreciate this kindness," she whispered to herself, "but it has to be done."

Then stealthily she locked the chests, rolled them out into the corridor and onto the trap. One by one, they plummeted through the automatic air locks and out into space.

An hour later Kiger grew restless at the controls, decided he would clean up the grisly business single-handed. He found Ajo dead to the world. He drew a gun and pressed it against the kingly temple, studied the drooping olive eyelids, heavy with sleep. A moment's hesitation. A glance about the room.

Something disconcerted him. That space on the floor. The jewel cases—where were they? Gone!

A chill of terror went through Kiger. He holstered his gun, stormed about the room. Frantic minutes of vain search—bewilderment—then sullen reflection.

Susette sat in the lounge lost in a book when Kiger strode in and roared at her. "I've just recollected where I saw you, before you were a space hostess!"

"Saw me?" Susette reddened.

"You! It was in a class I visited. A young fellow named Kendrick worked out a problem, and you were there! You caught it!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," the girl stammered.

"Yeah? You were swift enough to catch the problem, and you're swift enough to play your own wits for the gems—"

"But I don't understand—"

"I understand!" the heavy jawed pilot snarled. "I know about the gravitational funnel we're in, the same as you do, and I figure I can find the end of it. We change our course this minute!"

He slammed the door and stalked to the control room.

CHAPTER IV

Crisis Comes to "Jones"

EBBTIDE Jones steadied the signboard, "JONES," while Stan Kendrick piled bucket-sized boulders around its base. Every few days (earth

time) they had to dig it out and replant it for more meteoroids rolled in constantly. The floating rock pile which they called their planet was three times larger than when they came.

Any many times richer! At least, in the beach comber's estimation.

The inpouring wealth kept Ebb so excited he grew thin from forgetting to eat. Every new speck of light that spiralled in from the void met his critical inspection.

Suddenly he dropped the sign and leaped far out into space to bring down something. "Well, I'm a seahoss!" Stan heard him exclaim through the radio, "if it ain't another Zandonian cop! Must be a murder epidemic somewhere out there."

They disposed of the twelfth Zandonian body and took the uniform to Ebb's cache, near the well-hidden space flivver. They pondered glumly. Foul business on the space routes! Pirates! Or possibly an international space chase. The mystery had an ugly look. It troubled Stan; especially when Ebb spoke of the fingernail marks on the wrists of the corpse and said, "There's a gal helpin' with this job!"

Then a week-old newspaper clipping shook out of the uniform and gave them the dazzling story of King Ajo Baustobub, his decision to charter a ship to Venus, take twelve guardsmen and the priceless Zandonian Gems.

Stan grew silent, thoughtful. Ebb kicked himself and bawled like a child. Zandonian Gems at the mercy of pirates! And here he plodded, collecting rocket motors, space guns, pocketbooks, uniforms! Why hadn't he gone in for piracy!

Stan clutched his wrist. Ebb looked up, saw, shrieked, leaped out into space to seize the spiralling trunk, ride it down.

Ten minutes later they sat petrified,

stared into three trunks of glittering gems. Ebb's eyes bugged out against his space helmet. He had lived all his life for this moment.

Stan shook his head. "We can't take them, Ebb."

"Can't—I?" Ebb gagged like a drowned cat. "But you told me I could have everything! You promised me—"

"I'm sorry, Ebb, but—"

"I'll give you part of it, Stan. I'll split it with you. I was goin' to anyway—"

Stan smiled but remained adamant, even though Ebb's face told him their friendship would shatter. "No, Ebb, it belongs to King Ajo. So far as we know, he's still alive; it's our duty to restore his property to him."

The frustrated Ebb peered into the blackness, desperately praying that the body of King Ajo would come in next. He wouldn't have been surprised, as swiftly as these magic events came.

A silk handkerchief lay in the corner of a jewel chest. Stan wadded it in his hand, stunned to discover it bore the initials, S. U.

"Let's cover these jewels, Ebb," he said. "We're going to have some company, and we'd better watch our step."

THE great space liner nosed into the vortex and crept cautiously several times around the boulder-studded sphere. Spiralling space balls bounced over its nose and rolled off its fins.

Within, the crew pressed their faces against the portholes and grumbled. They had learned Kiger's reason for coming here and they thought him crazy. Recover gems lost in space! Absurd!

"I still think it was the girl that dumped them overboard," said Macey, "even though Ajo claims he did it. I figure he's lyin' to protect her."

"Yeah? Kiger says the king did it."

"He's lyin' too, cause he's got a crush on the girl."

"We shoulda got her out of the way beforehand. I'd bet my helmet the stuff's gone for good."

The ship stopped and the captain faced his crew. "All right, you backbiters, before we go look for those gems, I'm ready to buy out any of you that wants to sell your cut. Who's first?"

The men hushed, reconsidered. Kiger gave orders. Baustobub was left securely locked in his cabin. The others donned their space suits, went forth. After much floundering and bouncing out into space, they stumbled upon a path of ropes and scraps of wreckage.

"Someone's been here," Kiger muttered through the radios. "Udell, what do you know about this?"

"No more than you do," the girl answered.

At that moment on the other side of the sphere Stan and Ebb faced each other in surprise. Stan motioned his companion not to speak, scribbled a command to him, "Cut off your transmitter. They're on our wave length."

Edd tried to obey, fumbled, muttered, "How the hell—" before Stan could chop him off. Every word from the party came to their ears. They heard Kiger roar, "Who said that?"

No answer.

"Who said, 'How the hell'?" he repeated. The men looked at each other blankly. "Someone's here!" Kiger snapped. "Follow me close and keep your guns ready. Udell, you walk ahead. You're good protection. Brewer, for God's sake, quit bumping out into space. Can't you tread light and hang on?"

THEY moved to a pole of the sphere where the artificial path ended at a signboard, "JONES." Kiger kicked it

and it sailed over into the dark.

Sun rays caught the figure of a man in space uniform who approached over the curved horizon. Susette gasped, looked for a sign of recognition, but got none.

"Gentlemen," Stan spoke coolly, "and Miss, I welcome you to the planet of Jones. What can I do—"

"Save your gah!" Kiger thundered. "We didn't come for a tea party. We want the gems."

"Mind your manners!" said Stan sharply. "You're trespassing on private property."

"Cut the stallin'! Your friend here, Miss Udell, knows your game as well as I do. Now you cough up three boxes of jewels—"

"If you're referring to the Zandonian gems," Stan came closer to the row of muzzles, "I have every intention of returning them to the owner."

"Then trot 'em out!" Kiger demanded. "The owner is waiting in my ship." He forced Susette to verify this statement, but Stan ignored her words.

"Let him come and claim them!"

Kiger snorted. "You think Ajo Baustobuh would risk his life on this shaky rock pile? He sent us to get them."

"Tell him that won't do!" Stan cracked. "I want to see him in person—and ask him who murdered his guards—and why!"

The gun muzzles quivered.

"All right, boys," Kiger snarled. "We can't waste words on this fellow. He knows too much. We'll find the jewels for ourselves. Let him have it!"

Three guns blazed as Stan fell to cover. Hot rays passed over him. He crowded a cluster of harrel sized boulders toward the gunmen, emptied his own automatic at them through the crevices. Shots went wild, men lost their footing, rolling boulders threw

them into a heap.

Stan heard Susette's cry, wondered where she cast her lot and whether her savage superior had captured her, heart and soul. A passing flash through his mind, swift as his muscles. He plunged into the dog pile of men, siezed a gun in time to hat a drawn revolver out of Kiger's hands. Then a shot hlew the weapon from his own hands, and a blow across his hack felled him.

As he fainted off he knew a muzzle came against his space helmet and a girl screamed.

He did not hear the voice that froze the men in their tracks. Ehb's voice that cried, "I've got the jewels packed in, Stan! Ship's all ready. Where are you?"

Kiger smiled. "That simplifies matters. Let's find that ship." A glance told him Stan was out of the picture. "Get along, Udell, and no more of that screaming."

Ehb's wail continued to pour in their ears. "I'm all set, Stan. Where are you?"

The frightened beach comber followed the path half a circumference before he spied the party toiling in his direction. The sun was on him, he saw the guns come up, ducked to cover as the stream of fire poured past him. Chilled to the marrow, he made for the darkened face of the sphere.

Too late he realized his mistake in opening the flivver's hiding place. The path they followed led to it. He fled over the boulders in torment. What to do? If he could only find Stan—or had they killed him?

Mutterings in his earphones sickened him, told him all was lost. "One's ship's as good as another," came Kiger's voice. "We'll pick up the liner later." The four men dragged the flivver out into the open. "Check up on the jewels!" And soon someone re-

ported back. "All three chests in the rear cabin."

Ebb crept closer, looked on, dazed. They gave the lithe ship a push out into space, caught the ladders, made for the air locks. In another moment rockets would fire and the thugs would be off with their booty.

Funny the gal didn't try to get aboard. She stood there like a mute statue. But the instant the last man entered, she set up a cry for Stan that chilled Ebb's blood.

Then her words broke. Out of the black horizon the leaping body of Stan caught the sun's gleam. The sphere's rotation was in his favor. Three low jumps brought him near. Pain showed in his movements as he snatched up something and bounded outward. A strange startling sight.

His leap was true. He caught the rear fin of the drifting boat. He battered the rear porthole with a stone. The glass was stubborn.

Kiger saw from within, caught the danger. If that glass went, the flivver's oxygen went with it. Out to the ladder came Kiger. He swung, seized a deadly grip on the perilously perched body, yanked the struggling, weightless form of Stan through the air locks, into the ship.

Susette screamed, grew weak, as she waited for the sight of the rocket explosion. Sickening realization—Stan had fought and lost!

But Stan's frantic effort gave Ebb his cue. He slid out of his cache carrying an object three times his size—a space cannon. A split second before the rockets fired off, the big gun blazed

at the flivver's nose, blew the control room to smithereens.

THE great space liner sped toward Venus.

Three chests of jewels rode in the cabin of Ajo Baustobub. A prisoner named Kiger found it was no use to wrench at his irons, grew silent. Three persons in the control room made merry.

"I must tell you, Kendrick," said King Ajo, "that Miss Udell is a different person since the ship is in your hands. I knew she was in love with a handsome scientist, but she did not tell me you were also a dashing daredevil."

"I didn't know it myself," laughed Susette, and Stan smiled as she kissed him.

"But tell me more of this strange Ebbtide," the king urged. "You say he blew up the ship as it charged off, then everything floated back. But why did he not come with us?"

"He preferred to be picked up on our return trip," said Stan, "so he'll have more time for space combing. It's a mania with him. Just now he has three more uniforms to piece together."

A silence followed.

"It must have been very hard for him to give up those gems," the king said thoughtfully. Then his face lightened with inspiration. "By the way, I wonder if . . . After all, he saved the day for all of us."

Ajo scribbled a note of appreciation, signed his name, tucked it under a trunk lid; then rolled the trunk onto the automatic disposal trap and let it drop into space.





The World That Dissolved

By Polton Cross

Strange radiation came from the exploding star,
and the tiny planet dissolved beneath his feet

CHAPTER I Observatory Ten

CURT VERNOL slowly cut off the power of his flyer's rear jets, gave a burst of recoil to the forward rockets which immediately slowed down the little space ship's tremendous headlong rush through infinity, a rush it had pretty well maintained ever since leaving Earth. Now it was in the remote regions beyond Pluto.

Somewhat moodily, Curt gazed through the forward port. To the left hung heavy little Pluto. Dead ahead, still some 300,000 miles distant, loomed a lone planetoid—actually the tenth planet of the solar system since it obeyed the Sun's gravity. A lonely little world, only a third the size of Earth, but with gravity almost identical through tight packing of materials.

A world utterly deserted save for one massive completely airtight observatory, better known as Observatory Ten, furthest flung observation post of all the system. Since 2004, ten years before, this and all the other observatories on each planet had been under the control of the Americas.

Curt's eyes be-

came faintly disgusted as he studied the tiny world.

"So that's where I've got to spend twelve months!" he growled. "Twelve months on a spacial desert island, keeping a watch on the cosmos for the long distance ships, guiding their courses . . . A veritable celestial lighthouse! Charming!"

Inwardly cursing the day he had joined the Space Observers and thereby left himself open for lonely jobs of this sort, he gave a final burst to the rockets and swept downward at terrific speed toward the distant planetoid. He hung tight in his seat, eating up the dozens of miles. . . . In two hours the lonely world was below him, jagged and scarred.

He flattened the ship out, made a perfect landing on the flat plain within a mile of the massive, towering Observatory.

In a moment he had scrambled into his space suit, and opened the airlock. Carefully he trod onto the jagged rock of the palely lit world, walking with infinite caution to avoid the slightest chance of tearing his suit. The light of the ridiculous sun, shedding the equivalent of full moonlight on Earth, enabled him to see pretty clearly where he was going.

All around him crouched massive,

Illustrated by Julian S. Krupa.

rugged rocks, glinting faintly in the dim light. Overhead, the vast vault of the universe was dusted with multimillions of stars. . . . Curt felt a trifle depressed, realized he would need all his willpower to defeat the loneliness begotten of constant association with cosmic fastness. . . .

At last he arrived at the monstrous airlock of the Observatory, paused for a moment to survey the rearing walls of *glasite*, an isotopic metal of beryllium basis. Far atop the building loomed the solitary unbreakable glass dome through which the observations were made.

He smiled rather grimly to himself, then reached out with his heated glove and pressed the lock's external button. He waited as the outermost lock began to move sideways, then he stepped inside. Three locks in all, the centermost one a "leveling off" room wherein he removed his space suit and accustomed himself to normal air pressure and a 70° Fahrenheit temperature . . .

As the last lock opened he stepped into the huge major room of the observatory and silently faced the man he had come to relieve.

CURT had never particularly liked Fletcher Gaunt at any time, and so far as he could see the twelve-month interval had not improved the man in the least. He was still coldly supercilious, bitter eyed, with a permanently harsh tautness about his thin-lipped mouth. Certainly he looked in good health. His lean cheeks were tinged with color, his black hair stood up vitally. . . .

For several seconds he stood regarding Curt steadily, then he snapped out uncivilly.

"And what the hell do you want?"

Curt stared at him in surprise. "What do I want? Your time's up, that's all:

I'm here to relieve you. I thought you'd be glad to see me."

"I'm not glad to see you, and my time isn't up for another week," Gaunt retorted acidly. "I don't like people here before time, it disarranges my work. You've got to work to schedule here, stuck away in this blasted hole—And I don't like it being interrupted! See?"

Curt remained silent, his lips compressed. Gaunt waved his arm vaguely.

"I saw your ship land," he growled. "I thought you were a lone traveler in need of help. That's why I let the locks open."

"I traveled rather faster than I intended. That new Myers rocket fuel enabled me to knock a week off schedule. . . ." Curt thrust his hands in his pockets, glanced around him. "I don't see what you're so concerned about, Gaunt. Why don't you get moving and hand things over to me? If I'm early, that's to your advantage."

"Yeah?" Gaunt eyed him darkly. "I'll go when I'm good and ready, not before. Nice damn thing when a guy can't finish his shift in peace! In another week I'll be glad to go, and not until then. In the meantime, it's against the Company's rules to have two men on one station, so you'd better be on your way."

Curt swung around, his brows down over his gray eyes.

"On my way! What the hell are you talking about?"

"Clear enough, isn't it? Besides, seven days' extra food will put you in the queer at the end of your shift here. My time isn't up yet, so cruise around until it is. That's all!"

Gaunt turned aside, only to swing back as Curt gripped his arm fiercely. Their eyes met.

"What's the big idea, Gaunt?" Curt asked in a low voice. "What are you afraid of? You don't think I'm mug

enough to believe you're stopping here for love of duty, do you?"

"If you've any brains, that's just what you *will* believe!"

"Yeah? And suppose I just stick around to worry you?"

"In that case . . ." Gaunt shrugged—then with a sudden lightning movement he snatched his flame pistol from its holster and leveled it steadily. "In that case," he resumed softly, "you'll meet up with the business end of this! Understand?"

Curt slowly raised his arms, eyes narrowed and jaw set. Gaunt came forward slowly, smiling cynically.

"I don't like little boys around before time, see? Either you take off into space again, or—"

He broke off suddenly as Curt abruptly lowered his right arm and slammed out his fist with terrific force. It struck Gaunt clean in the face, sent him reeling backwards with blood trickling from a split lip. Taken utterly by surprise he went reeling backward, brought up hard against the control board of the monstrous telescopic reflector. His gun clattered out of his hand.

Instantly, Curt dived for it—but he wasn't quick enough. By the time he had slithered to it Gaunt had recovered himself, snatched it up from the floor from under Curt's very hand. Ruthlessly he swung it upward and depressed the button. . . .

Curt dropped with a crash to the floor, the upper part of his head entirely seared away. He dropped face up, still with an expression of amazed horror on his features.

FOR several seconds Gaunt stood staring, mechanically wiping his bleeding lip with the back of his hand. The gun fumes curled acridly round his nostrils. . . . Then very gradually he

mastered himself, pushed the gun back in its holster.

"Damn!" he breathed, and scowled.

"This may prove difficult unless I—"

He stood thinking for a while, then slowly nodded to himself. In a moment or two he had drawn a space suit onto the corpse, pulled on his own suit, then lifted the body in his arms. Opening the triple locks he finally gained Curt's small space flyer and dropped the body inside it. He removed the space suit again, then taking Curt's own flame gun from his belt he fired a charge harmlessly into the air, put the weapon back in Curt's stiffening hand.

The rest was simple. He set the space machine's controls to a straight path and slipped the automatic delayed action pilot in commission. By the time he had left the ship and closed the airlock with the external counter switches the controls were ready to function.

Smiling grimly behind his glass helmet Gaunt watched the little flyer hurtle upward, vanish almost immediately against the star scattered expanse of void.

"Easy," he murmured. "Suicide in the void. Common enough when loneliness gets a pilot, especially a new guy like Vernol. . . . Possibly he'll never be found. Even if he is, I'm in the clear."

Chuckling at his own ingenuity he returned to the observatory. Hardly had he removed his space suit before the long distance space radio whistled stridently for attention. Immediately he settled before the banked apparatus, tuned in to the special wavelength which was the secret of himself and few associates. As he had expected, the coldly clipped voice of Ranvil Gates came into the loud speaker.

"Gaunt? We're two million miles away from you. All set for a landing when we arrive?"

"I am—now," Gaunt assented.

"Meaning what?"

Briefly Gaunt related the details of his adventure with Curt Vernol. Ranvil Gates gave a whistle.

"Say, that was a darned good idea of yours. Not much chance of him being found though out in the intergalaxies."

Gaunt laughed shortly. "There'd have been no need for any of it if you'd arrived up to time. Where in hell have you been all this time? You were due three days ago."

"We've been having trouble with the stern rocket tubes. This tub isn't good for many more trips, chief. We've patched them up, but I don't like the look of 'em even now. Sooner we clear the gravity fields of the big fellows the better I'll like it."

"Plenty of stuff aboard?"

"Say, there's enough platinum here to make us all millionaires for life. All those little tradings we've done will be fleabites compared to this lot. Wait till you see it!"

"That's just what I am waiting for!" Gaunt retorted. "And step on it, will you? I can't leave here until you come: there's no other ship, remember."

"O. K. Be with you in twenty-four hours. . . ."

"Right." Gaunt switched off, slowly rubbed his hands together in anticipation. Illicit platinum mining on Io was distinctly profitable, and well worth the risk.

With a daredevil like Gates to do the work and this lonely outpost as a distributing station to the shady buyers of various planets. . . . Easy! Wonderfully easy! Probably Curt Vernol was better dead, after all. Had he only gone into space to finish his time he might have learned too much. . . .

"Far better dead," Gaunt murmured reflectively—then he frowned in surprise as the normal Earth radio wave started the signaling apparatus off

again. Puzzled, he tuned in.

"Observatory Ten answering Earth. What is it, Earth?"

"Chief Earth Observatory calling Observatory Ten. Is this Observer Vernol?"

"Observer Vernol has not yet arrived—is not due for seven more earth days," Gaunt replied calmly. "This is Observer Gaunt. . . ."

"Observer Gaunt, you will take full details of star known as Acron 3784, between the paths of Canopus and Delta Argus, almost at the entrance of the Great Cleft in Argus. This star, which is probably of the temporary order, came into being on March 17, 2000, and became a fourth magnitude star. Has now dropped to the fifth magnitude. Report in detail and give reasons. Earth observations none too clear. That is all."

"Message received. Acron 3784 will be investigated," Gaunt intoned, and switched off.

CHAPTER II

Acron 3784

THE matter was purely routine work. Stars that come and go are common enough. Gaunt got to his feet and strode to the vast high powered telescope in the center of the great room, swung round the pilot telescope until at last Acron was on the line-divided finder. Moving to the controlling panel he soon had the star centered exactly on the great viewing mirror of mercurioid alloy. The reflector, utilizing new magnetic means of trapping light waves, produced an image that was flawless and still.

Gaunt dimmed the lights, studied the image carefully. Acron had always been a bit of a mystery, anyway—one of that strange family of mystically born stars which make their appearance suddenly

in various parts of the sky, and then probably vanish just as strangely.

Fourth magnitude to fifth? Gaunt turned away from the screen and got to work with his spectroheliograph, made the usual routine study. The star was a main-sequence star of the G-type, and of typical solar characteristics. The spectrum of its photosphere was crossed by innumerable fine dark lines produced by the metallic absorptions in its higher atmosphere, together with definite evidences of calcium. Mass was almost identical with Earth's sun. Acron 3784 was indeed pretty similar to thousands of other main sequence stars in the universe, save in the matter of its sudden drop in magnitude.

Gaunt yawned a little. So what? He had checked up, and that was all there was to it. Thoughtfully, he went on checking the absolute magnitude a star of that type could stand. It had dropped from magnitude 4.7 to exactly 5.53, and was still dropping. . . .

Gaunt stroked his chin. That lay pretty close to instability. Anything below 6.78 magnitude would pass the star over the borderline from main sequence type to white dwarf. . . .

He turned back to the screen. Other things were visible on Acron. Its brilliant photosphere, shielded by the telescope's dark glass screens, was punctured with rapidly growing spots—scars that spread visibly from the equatorial regions as the moments passed by. Definitely, the marks were sunspots, occurring at tremendous speed. Gaunt remembered the phenomenon was by no means uncommon. He had seen stars eat themselves out in this fashion in a matter of hours.

Pensive, he continued to watch. The change in magnitude was now explained.

The star was suffering from a severe attack of sunspots, spreading where no normal sunspots should, from equator

to poles. As the minutes went by the magnitude dropped still more.

Gaunt's last reading was 5.82. He relayed that observation to Earth, promised further details as they came through, then turned to the more important matter of watching space for some sign of Ranvil Gates. But the telescope only gave a view of the eternal stars. As yet, Gates' ship was not in sight.

Gaunt thought of Curt Vernol's shattered body far out in the wastes. A cold smile touched his lips. . . . He turned the reflector back to Acron. . . .

ACRON had changed again. Its face was a mass of spots, many of them obviously thousands of miles wide. Its light too had dimmed considerably. Again Gaunt calculated. . . .

Magnitude 6.80. The star was over the stability region. In that case—Gaunt shrugged. Just another stellar death, taking place at such a speed it could be viewed at leisure. Not that Gaunt wanted to view it, anyway: he had other things to worry him.

Once more he turned to the radio and gave his final report that Acron 3784 had crossed the stability line and would descend rapidly to a white dwarf state and finally expire altogether. Then he turned from the apparatus and glanced at his watch. He had time to get a sleep, and by then Gates should be somewhere close at hand.

He left the reflector mechanism in operation, slowly turning to follow Acron. No sense in setting the thing twice: he'd have to make one more general analysis report, anyhow.

GAUNT awoke suddenly, aware that for some time his incoherent dreaming had been disturbed by a curious sound—a far distant hissing sound that was totally alien to the usually

sepulchral quiet of this lone world. Normally, there was not a single sound save for the solemn snicking of the electric clocks.

Gaunt thought of Gates, of the dead Curt Vernol, of Acron 3784. Then he got off the bed and looked through the thick glass of the window. There was nothing save the far distant, pinpoint sun and rugged, barren rock. No sign of Gates: no sign of anything.

Rubbing his tousled head he switched on the lights and shuffled into the observatory, yawning as he went. Then his yawn stopped half way as he crossed the threshold of the doorway. He stared blankly, utterly unable to comprehend what he saw.

In the center of the huge place, where he had left the great reflector to follow Acron, was a hole. No reflector was present: the glass roof yawned like an empty eye. And on the metal floor was that hole, perfectly circular, buzzing and hissing like a hive of bees, filled within its expanse with deep, deadly black—the coal black of space that spoke of total absence of light reflection.

Gaunt gave a huge gulp and became suddenly aware that his knees were shaking with shock at the incredible thing that had come to pass. With baffled eyes he went closer to the hole and stared at it. It was perhaps two feet deep in the immensely tough metal floor, faultlessly shorn round the edges and growing wider and wider as he stared at it.

At last his gaze rose to the massive pillars that had supported the reflector. They were chopped off clean, as though with a vast blade. In an exact line from the glass in the roof to the hole in the floor, covering a width of two feet, everything solid had totally disappeared! The reflector bearings, the screen, the cables. . . . All the lot.

Eighty tons of solid metal gone in five

hours or so? Metal flooring too, that was made to withstand the ravages of space cold? Even virgin basic rock on which the Observatory was built? Gaunt licked his suddenly dry lips, stared over the hole toward the radio apparatus. . . . So far that was untouched.

Then as the buzzing went on without interruption he looked round him again. The bearings of the vanished reflector were still disappearing into thin air, working slowly downward toward him. And that hole in the floor was increasing. . . .

HE turned suddenly, reached behind him and took up a metal rod from the work bench. Tentatively, he waved it above the hole. Nothing happened. Then he dropped it right into the hole. The buzzing seemed to become transiently louder, then the rod vanished utterly.

Gaunt frowned deeply. His fear had gone for the moment: instead, the scientist in him was uppermost. This thing had to have an explanation, and the root of that explanation seemed to be Acron 3784. He turned swiftly to the main window and stared out onto the depths at the spot where Acron should have been. But it was no longer visible—not to the naked eye, at least. Like thousands of other temporary stars Acron had disappeared entirely.

"It had to vanish, anyway," Gaunt muttered. "Once it crossed the stability line it was bound to become a white dwarf. First it had sunspots which abnormally reduced its radiation. It crossed the line of safety and started to contract at terrific speed. The more it contracted the more the internal temperature rose and the more the surface cooled. The internal temperature would destroy the atoms in Acron's interior: there'd just be free electrons and

stripped nuclei. Rapidly, the effect spread to the photosphere and that too collapsed. Acron became a white dwarf of densely packed material in an incredibly short space of time. . . . And what happened when that contractive process began?"

He mused for a moment, went on talking to the air.

"Obviously, the destruction of the atoms and the vast electronic changes would release radiation through space. Thousands of years of normal supply would be squandered in an instant, as Eddington once showed so clearly. No more atoms to dam back the flood, no anything except a sudden outflow of all sorts of radiation. Then the white dwarf stage. . . ."

"Radiation," he repeated softly, turning to look back at the hole. "Radiation was concentrated right there. That telescope being of magnetic light wave trapping qualities, would draw both light waves and all other radiations to a focus, conduct them down the tubes onto the mercurioid mirror. Whatever radiations were given off by Acron at the moment of its final collapse were concentrated here. And then . . ."

GAUNT stopped suddenly, moved to his instrument rack and took down a delicately balanced electrical apparatus. It was a Briggs Electronic Detector, so called by reason of its delicately balanced ability to check up on the vibrations of individual electrons in any given matter or gas. Carefully he fixed the highly complex controls and studied the testing screen keenly.

Thirty minutes passed. . . . An hour. And the hole had grown larger. When Gaunt finally studied his readings he could hardly credit his eyes.

"Is it possible?" he muttered. "Nothing but electrons in that hole. Negative electrons. No protons whatever: no op-

posite electric charge. One charge without the other, therefore nothing. For some reason protons have canceled out and all that remains is . . . Is the primal constituent of the universe. Negative electrons."

He became silent, turning the thing over in his mind. The buzzing worried him, so did the gradually expanding hole and vanishing metal pillars. . . . But the scientific riddle had stirred him. Slowly he went across to his desk and drew paper and pencil to him, began to figure slowly and thoughtfully, regardless of everything save the mystery that confronted him.

When at last he became conscious of his surroundings again he had the thing clear. It was remarkable enough, but the only possible solution.

"So I've stumbled on it," he breathed, staring in front of him. "The secret of space and matter! Soddy believed that there might be two classes of electricity in the universe with definite opposite effects, but he found only one which he called 'neutral,' though its effects were either positive or negative according to the balance achieved.*

Gaunt looked back at his computations, surveyed them absently.

"That makes it clear," he murmured. "It makes clear why there are such enormous ranges of empty space compared to the amount of solid matter

* Eddington showed us that the blasting away of atoms at the moment of a star slipping into the white dwarf stage leaves only uncontrolled negative electrons which radiate an energy that can only be classed as negative energy. Negative energy then, is space itself. That negative energy is backed by the whole preponderance of space. It was conducted down the mirror tubes and set up a negative energy field of terrific power which overbalanced and canceled the power of the positive protons, destroying the atoms themselves and leaving only electrons. And, since that original field was backed by all the vast preponderance of space, as against only the small positive units constituting the planet and all it contained, positive and negative do not balance any more. There is only negative—expanding space—in the hole.—Author.

therein. Only on rare occasions does the positive field balance the negative, and then matter comes into being. Space—negative energy—is the dominant factor. It explains why the stars are surrounded by millions of miles of emptiness. . . .

"Unintentionally, I have solved the whole secret of the universe. In the beginning there was only negative. From somewhere there came drifting positive fields, maybe from an extrauniversal source, and so matter was born wherever the fields crossed and balanced. And now . . ."

CHAPTER III

The Growing Circle of Death

GAUNT rose to his feet. The obvious thing to do was to communicate his discovery to Earth. He had discovered something that scientists had tried to find for generations—the answer to the mystery of which came first—space or matter?

He swung toward the radio apparatus—then stopped dead. It had become encompassed in the area of that vastly swollen hole. The vital wires to the generators had gone into nothing. The whole floor around it yawned in a deepening, utterly black pit. Communication with Earth, with anywhere for that matter, was definitely finished.

For the first time, Gaunt felt a vague qualm of fear. Up to now he had been absorbed in the interest of his discovery—but it was suddenly forced upon him that whatever he knew was entirely his own knowledge. He could not pass it on. Further, he was on a shrinking world, fast transforming itself into primal space-stuff.

He tried to think coherently, glanced quickly at the clock. The lapse of time during his deductions amazed him. Ran-

vil Gates ought to be somewhere in sight now. Upon him relied the only chance of getting off this collapsing world.

Gaunt leapt to the window and stared out at the stars. There was no sign of a distant glittering speck, no hint whatever of Gates being anywhere near. . . . He drummed his fingers agitatedly on the window frame, looked back at the widening hole. Before very long it would have encompassed the entire laboratory floor, and since it went downward at unknown, but great, speed it would only be a matter of hours before it pierced clean through this small world and allowed the deadly cold of space to sweep through. The entire little globe would be like an apple with a hole bored through it.

"No!" Gaunt whispered. "No! I won't be trapped here! Gates will come! He's got to come!"

He turned nervously and snatched his space suit from its cupboard. Hastily he clambered into it. He took one last look at the relentless hole, then tore open the three airlocks and went blundering outside onto the ragged plain. . . .

THE stars winked down at him steadily. He fancied he must have been a victim of hysteria for a moment or two. He lost awareness of his immediate surroundings, came back to himself with the realization that he had traveled some distance from the observatory and had now brought up sharp with his back against frowning black rock. His legs were shaking oddly. Perspiration poured down his face inside his stifling suit. He gazed wildly up at the stars.

And suddenly he saw something. A faint, not very far distant glimmer. He was practised enough in space lore to recognize the object as a lone space flyer. His heart gave a mighty leap. The object was coming nearer, beyond

doubt, backed by distant, sullen Jupiter and the giant worlds.

"Gates!" Gaunt screamed, inside his helmet. "Gates! I knew you'd come! Thank God! Thank God!"

He turned and scrambled up the low hill of rock behind him, gradually blundered to the top—stood a lone figure silhouetted against the stars. He waved his arms frantically, watched with an insane desperation as the glittering speck came nearer. . . .

At last it was no longer a speck but a visibly cigar shaped object. It was perhaps a hundred miles away now, perfectly distinct in the airless vacuum.

Again Gaunt waved his bloated arms, but the flyer showed no signs of coming toward him. . . .

He stared at it hungrily, then with a feeling of sickly horror as he saw it was only three quarters of a ship. The back half had been blown away by some force or other, blown away so completely that there was not even the derelict section trailing behind, chained by mass.

The stern rocket tubes! Suddenly Gaunt remembered Gates' message. They had been giving trouble, and if seized up—They *had* seized up! Gaunt knew enough of space flying to recognize the trouble. The explosive gases had not passed off freely; instead smashed the jet tubes and blown out the back part of the ship. And in that old pirate tub there were no safety compartments, even granting there had been time to use them. So far as Gaunt could judge, the ship's occupants must have died instantly from the sudden inrush of vacuum.

The ship was now just drifting along with its original momentum, too far away from the planet to actually reach it. The counteractive fields of the giant planets were too great. In the end it would probably halt, then drift slowly back toward Pluto and Neptune. . . .

GAUNT realized all these things with a deep inner numbness. A hundred miles or so between him and a life of constant luxury. Had he only been able to reach the ship, space suited as he was, he would have found some way to patch it up until he reached friends on other planets. All he could do now was watch the ship drift slowly away, until at last it vanished in the blaze of the stars. . . .

A deep sigh escaped him. He cursed the regulation that did not permit a man to have a spare space ship; that forced him to wait until he was freed by the ship of the relief man.

Little by little he realized his last chance had gone. He was alone on this world. Gates was dead; the radio was useless; no regular ships came out this far. The whole vast vault of infinity was empty of craft. Only the stars—the everlasting stars.

He had solved the secret of the universe, had seen a fortune and escape drift by under his nose, and now—

He swung round suddenly. Out of the tail of his eye he saw something happen to the observatory. Staring at it, he saw it quickly cave inward with all four walls—collapse into a vast black circle that matched the dark of space. . . .

He sat down shakily, felt curiously light headed. He knew the reason immediately. One cause was his intense emotion, and the other was the slow lessening of gravitation. As the mass of the planet was slowly converted into space the gravity correspondingly lowered. He was losing weight.

Turmoiled thoughts whirled through his brain. Stranded on a world all by himself—the victim of malign circumstances. There *had* to be a way to escape this crumbling prison! He had done nothing to deserve death, anyway. Besides—

Nothing to deserve it? Suddenly he

(continued on page 115)

FACE



in the SKY By THORNTON AYRE

There couldn't be a Face in the sky. Not a living one. But when it spoke, an awe-stricken world rushed to obey its command

CHAPTER I Nebula 76K

THE YEAR 1990! And a world bristling with preparedness armament awaited the last war.

But then the unexpected happened.

It was formless at first. It resembled an electrical storm far away in the region of the Pole Star. Yet in some way it differed from an electrical haze; it was more after the style of a nebula, an oval patch of mist appearing as large as the sun. And, most amazing thing, it was within the boundaries of the Solar System. A nebula *inside* the solar system . . . ?

Unquestionably it demanded the attention of the scientists. It certainly sharpened the curiosity of Stuart Bates, the thirty-five-year-old assistant astronomer of the New York Observatory. That he was just an assistant rankled strongly with Stu; he knew that the impatient chief, Boyd Granville, had only become the ruler of the observatory through influence and not through knowledge. What the Sam Hill did he know about science anyway? Didn't he always rely on the younger man for data?

Certainly the husky, blond headed

Stu was well able to take care of the responsibility. He had his pet ideas, too. He believed he might one day communicate by radio to other worlds. Jane Carter, the young television actress, was with him in that. They'd got engaged on the strength of it. When time permitted they worked towards that common and of bridging the interstellar gap. Without doubt, the flaxen haired Jane knew all the scientific answers, even if she was an actress of world renown.

When Stu came to study the reflector's photographic findings of the nebula, he did not quite know what to think; neither did the Chief. It was peculiar indeed, but that mist—through the telescope—looked devilishly like a malignant face! The eyes were there, the nose, the mouth and jaw, capped by a lofty forehead; but as yet the phenomenon was so distant the details were none too accurate.

Of course it could only be chance that the nebula looked that way. Just the same, the Chief advised suppression of the real facts in case the susceptible public got the idea wrong. So the unknown nebula became Nebula 76K in the records of the observatory and the

Chief promptly dismissed the idea from his mind.

Stu was rather loath to drop the investigation, but force of circumstances compelled him to do so. He was suddenly ordered by other observatories to make all observations of Pluto and check the current astronomical report that the little ninth planet had developed a gouge on its surface representing a penetration to perhaps 30 miles inside its mass. Stu checked the observation easily enough. The giant reflector revealed that the far-flung little world had a V-shaped notch in its side. The reason was fairly obvious. Some dark, wandering meteor of the void had struck the planet a terrific blow and torn a massive chunk out of it.

Stu logged the matter in the routine way, made his own private notes about it—as he always did when anything unusual happened—and passed on the desired verification to other observatories.

Then he resumed his studies of Nebula 76K. In two nights it had become considerably bigger and the details were much clearer. The resemblance to a face was more startling than ever. Staring into the mirror with keen blue eyes Stu fancied he could make out slumberous optics hidden by a doming forehead. Somehow, though he was by no means a nervous individual, the contemplation frightened him a little. There was something eerie about that immovable visage floating out there among the northern stars.

He was in something of a quandary too. The Chief had said the matter was finished with: for that reason he dare not bring up the problem again. The Chief was touchy that way. But on the other hand. Stu scratched his thick blond hair and finally gave up the riddle, went on with routine work and wondered how much of the face

was actual and how much due to his fertile imagination.

IN this short space of a week the face grew to proportions easily discernable to the naked eye. Night after night, when the weather permitted, it became visible in the north—large enough now to encompass Ursa Major on the one side and Cassiopeia on the other. The Pole Star itself had been obliterated.

Scientists began to get jittery. The public was more than jittery; it was definitely frightened. The vision of that distant, immovable face like a watching god, brooding over city and country alike, was unnerving. Stronger minded ones managed to laugh at it, but even they were inwardly alarmed. No one could look at the Face and remain unmoved.

Stu had no theories to offer. Even if he had he knew better than mention them. Theories were only for the Chief. And very antiquated ones they were as a rule.

"Just the same," Stu said thoughtfully, when he and Jane found the time for one of their rare get-togethers, "it is queer. Darned queer!"

"Take a look at it from here!"

The girl, five foot two of slender, blonde loveliness, was standing by the window of this little experimental hut in the Adirondacks she and Stu had bought. The solitary window looked due north—and there in the winter sky hung that grey white face, coldly inimical.

"Any ideas about it?" the girl asked, as Stu joined her. She turned her pretty, softly moulded face towards him. Its beauty was definitely enhanced by the yellow scarf she wore tucked in the neck of her blouse.

"No ideas at all," Stu grunted moodily. "Anyway, it can't be a real face."

"Why not?"

"Why, because— Because it's beyond all reason! Anyway, we didn't come here to look at that; we've radio work to do."

He turned aside and sat down amid the jumble of radio equipment filling the center of the little room. The girl joined him, her deep gray eyes pensive.

"The more we work on this darned thing the more I think that communication between worlds is impossible," Stu growled. "We've tried every conceivable system and arrangement, and what do we get? Nothing!"

"Granting the waves reach a planet what guarantee have we that they understand them, that they even have instruments?" the girl asked quietly. "I don't know whether you've ever read Felminoff's theory of life on other worlds, but he says radio is the last method to use. Vibrations would be a better scheme—or even signs of some sort. I've a feeling we're on the wrong tack, and I've said so for long enough. Only you won't listen!"

Stu glanced up with a faint smile. "I guess it isn't much use listening, Jane, when I can't follow the advice. I've no means of producing vibrations over millions of miles, so radio is the only alternative."

"I don't know that you haven't. In that radio apparatus you've got the basis of remote control anyway. You could control anything for a hundred miles and more; extending the vibratory influence is only a matter of study."

"Oh, to hell with it. Felminoff's not always right anyway. I think you pay too much attention to him."

The girl shrugged her dainty shoulders and sat down beside him. She had used up all the ideas in radio she knew in an endeavor to produce the right one

for interplanetary communication, but without avail. Even with Stu's trained knowledge added to them nothing had emerged beyond remote control, and that definitely was not much use.

"Anyway," Stu grunted at last, "there may be something in the idea at that. Might make a basis for space travel. I've made a model rocket that would carry any man over the gulf if he had the security of radio control right behind him."

He glanced towards the bench where a tubular object with small firing cylinders lay discarded.

"Radio communication is so much easier," he sighed, and for a moment or two sat surveying the mass of apparatus. Then with a grunt of impatience he switched over the power of the mountain stream-driven generator to a powerful receiver, sat back and listened.

THE cracklings of static from the electrically ridden air burst from the speaker. Amongst the din, half formed, was the jumble of stations, belated news from overseas, ships' signals, a dance band, all blurred with the obliterating stream of atmospherics.

Jane sat wincing; Stu frowned heavily—until both of them began to notice that there ran through the jumble a thin thread of speech, extremely faint, extremely deep, that took several seconds to impress itself on the pair.

Jane started forward suddenly, her face amazed. Stu sat up too from his lounging position. For a split second or two the voice was clear.

"People of Earth, you must prepare to obey my wishes! I am watching you. . . ."

The voice, faint though it was, was a deep inhuman bass, filled with a rich quality denied to any human throat.

"What the hell—!" Stu exclaimed blankly, as the words were repeated once more in that sepulchral profundo. Then they stopped suddenly. . . .

"Who—who's saying that?" Jane stammered at last, startled.

"I dunno. Stopped now all right."

Stu was right—but in that brief period of voice he had noticed something. The detector on his apparatus, pointing to the source of the communication, had stopped with its needle erect. Pointing upwards, to the north. To the face!

He gave a quick glance at the girl. She had seen the indicator too. She shouted now over the cacophony of resumed stations.

"The—the Face? Did the Face say that?"

Stu switched off. The silence seemed suddenly intense.

"Couldn't have been," he muttered, giving a short laugh. "It's too absurd! Somebody playing a joke."

"The indicator wasn't, though, and it points north and up!"

Jane got to her feet, clearly uneasy. She moved over to the window and stared northward. The Face was still there, unmoving. Abruptly she spun round.

"Stu, let's get back to the city," she said quietly. "I'm getting nervous—honest I am! I don't like sitting up here hearing things like that. If it was a joke we'll soon know. Oh come on, please!"

Stu shrugged, imagined he looked calm. Inwardly he was far more worried than he cared to admit. O.K. for a girl to be a bit jittery of course, but not for him. He picked up her heavy coat and held it for her.

"Let's go," he said simply. "Maybe we both heard things."

the following morning when the papers carried headlines about the mystery call. Not that the matter was the isolated concern of America. The entire western hemisphere had heard that faint bass, had wondered what it implied, who was responsible.

It required no effort of genius for the reporters of various countries to link up the voice with the face in the sky which had been coming visibly nearer night by night. A wave of panic swept the more nervous of people. An inhuman bass voice from a place unknown and a face in the sky had all the ingredients necessary for a first class sensation.

As usual, when in a jam beyond their understanding, the people turned to science for opinion. The New York Observatory, among others, came in for plenty of questioning. Not that they could explain much anyway. They published prints of the face as seen through the telescopes, and observed that it was most likely a nebula that looked like a face. The voice they could not explain, and that was why they sounded unconvincing.

Radio engineers were equally baffled by the voice, but they had resolved, they stated, to get their detectors to work if the voice was repeated and find out exactly where it came from. They knew it came from overhead to the north—but that might mean anything. Trouble was that the atmosphere was so upset it made detection difficult.

For a week the voice was not heard again and humanity breathed a trifle more freely under the belief that it had been a clever hoax. Stu, busy every night at the Observatory, was not so sure. In fact, the idea of the voice coming from the face was one that rather appealed his fantastic imagination.

And beyond doubt the Face was still

THAT neither of them had been mistaken about the voice was revealed

approaching. In every part of the western world men and women were watching it. In the week of the voice's silence it had certainly become larger, occupying a quarter of the sky and blotting out the stars behind it. The nose and mouth, hard and firm, were distinguishable. So were the deep set, unblinking eyes and lofty forehead. It was as though Colossus brooded over the affairs of men. It was frightening—horribly so.

The more Stu studied the visage through the telescope, always accompanied now in this period of emergency by the Chief, the more he wondered about a theory forming in his mind. Certainly he dare not publish it: its fantasy was opposed to the cold ethics of his profession.

But at least there was no harm in trying it out on Jane. He waited until she had a free night, then reeled it off to her in the cosy warmth of her uptown apartment.

"Suppose," he said slowly, "it's the face of an extra-universal being?"

The girl lay back on the divan, pondering, the light catching the exquisite silver ripple of her hair.

"You mean that our solar system is an atom in a macro-universe and that somebody in that macro-universe is watching us?"

"Just that. The voice said he was watching us, didn't he?"

"Yes, that's true, but— It can't be right, Stu, because a Face couldn't stay immobile so long. I mean it would surely move a little? Think of the time it's had the same expression!"

"That's just it!" he cried. "It strengthens my idea. Don't you see, the time relationship is different? A mere glance from that being might last a year or a century to us. I'm sure I've got something," he went on keenly. "The Face is getting nearer too. That,

as I see it, means that our solar system as an atom in a macro-universe, is moving nearer to the position of the Face."

"But," Jane said seriously, "if the time relationship is so different how do you account for the voice being audible? That doesn't take a year or a century to make itself understood. And anyway, how does a voice reach into our little world from a vast supra-universe?"

STU frowned. That lay as a sudden barrier in the path.

"Damned if I can figure that bit," he confessed, shrugging. "It involves sound and vibration mechanics beyond my knowledge. But it's possible a master scientist might make himself audible. Either it is the voice of the Face itself and we cannot see the movement of his lips as he speaks—or else it is a separate voice transmitted to us by methods too complicated for us to understand."

"Hmmm . . ." Jane said, by no means satisfied. She got to her feet and poured out drinks. She seemed about to say something as she handed Stu his glass, then both of them glanced toward the softly playing radio in the corner as the program was cut off to give place to the emergency announcer's voice.

"Attention everybody! We are asked by the Medical Board to issue the following bulletin—An outbreak of severe erysipelas has suddenly appeared in western coastal towns of the Americas, and in several inland towns as well. The disease is highly contagious and in an effort to prevent it spreading until the medical faculty have determined the cause, you are each one asked to refrain from visiting or contacting anybody known to have this ailment. Emergency measures and isolationary procedure will be taken later.

That is all."

"How—how horrible!" Jane whispered, shuddering. "Wonder what started it? Sounds like something out of the middle ages. I hope to Heaven it keeps away from here. My theatrical work is finished if anything marks my skin."

She turned, surprised, as Stu remained silent. He was sitting staring in front of him, glass unheeded in his hand.

"Anything wrong?" Jane asked briefly.

"Eh? Oh, no! Sorry!" He sat up and finished his drink. "Just something caught my fancy. This erysipelas has given me a new line."

"Doesn't take much to start your imagination working, does it?" the girl smiled.

He grinned back at her. "Men with imagination can rule the world," he observed; then he looked at his watch. "But I can't stop here any longer otherwise I'll miss my sleep. Hard going at the observatory these days; I've nearly forgotten what a bed looks like. Guess we'll have nother shot at the radio in the Adirondacks when all this has been cleared up, eh?"

"Of course!" She rose too as he got to his feet. He held her for a moment.

"Not frightened any more?" he murmured.

She grimaced. "No time to be! I've two pictures on schedule at the studio and that's keeping me plenty busy. When you get some more spare time let me know. I'll try and fix it."

"Right! And try not to worry."

He kissed her gently, left in a thoughtful frame of mind with strange half formed ideas buzzing round his brain. Outbreak of erysipelas? Face in the sky? Voice? The scientific training he had had somehow insisted that there was a clue in all this, but

what it was still escaped him.

CHAPTER II

Epidemic

LIKE an all consuming tide the erysipelas epidemic swept down on the world, not limiting itself to the western hemisphere but attacking other parts of earth as well, including Russia, India, and many parts in Europe. In fact it seemed that nowhere was immune from it—except perhaps in the far north of the earth, where it was presumed the cold prevented the disease getting a hold.

On the day following the news bulletin warning, the effects of the unexpected scourge were more than evident on the faces of New Yorkers. Men and women appeared at their places of business with ugly burning patches and scars upon their hands and faces, and on other parts of their bodies hidden by clothing. Isolation was all very well, but work had to go on when one's living depended on it, and since the victims experienced no actual feeling of illness they went about their work as usual.

From a feeling of uneasiness and alarm, the emotions of the American, British and European people changed to real terror, particularly as the Face in the sky loomed nearer. And on the very night following the outbreak of erysipelas there came another message in that profound bass voice. This time everybody with a radio set heard it. Stu heard it in the observatory as he checked over recent photographs of the Face with the technical staff and the Chief.

In dead silence the little group listened.

"People of Earth, listen! I am watching you. As the representative of my

people I am observing everything you do. For centuries now—to you that is—you have been sunken in bestiality, have spent your time devising new means to destroy each other. Do not attempt to understand me, for that is impossible. I have science and knowledge beyond your imagining. I am in a world far beyond yours, a world where in your entire universe is but a molecule. Some of our powers you have already felt.

"You are being attacked by powerful cosmic rays which burn and blister your skin. The attack will continue until you have all decided to observe the true standards of civilization. You have a world groaning under the weight of engines of war. One by one you will destroy those deadly armaments, rid yourselves forever of the threat and scourge of war.

"If you do not, you will be destroyed by us—by cosmic rays—as beings unfit to populate a fair planet. Destroy then—or be destroyed! I shall continue to watch you, and until you learn sense the cosmic ray attack will continue without pause. You have been warned!"

The voice stopped dead, its deep thunderous tones rolling through the reaches of the Observatory. For a space the staff stood in motionless amazement, then Chief Granville, ox-like and empurpled of face, whirled round to the telephone and snatched up the receiver.

"Hallo there!" His booming voice was acid with impatience. "Get me radio control headquarters quickly!"

The others stood waiting and listened to his sharp comments.

"You couldn't? No exact detail? Above? Huh! What the hell's the use of a radio control center if you can't do something? Eh? I don't want excuses! I want action!"

He slammed down the receiver and came forward slowly, his bulgy blue eyes glaring in anger.

"Some station!" he snapped. "They can't determine where the voice actually came from. They know it's from above, but exactly whereabouts above is open to doubt. A good deal of confusing static to." He pondered, scratched his half bald head. "Loath though I am to admit it, it looks very likely that this face is the genuine article. After all, an extra-universal being, watching us, would look like that."

HE glared round for approval. Stu smiled bitterly. Just like the Chief to be told exactly what the phenomenon was, by the phenomenon, and then produce it as his own idea.

"See something funny in the idea, Bates?" the great man barked.

Stu gave the slightest of starts.

"Not exactly, sir. I was just recalling the fact that I had the same theory of an extra-universal being some days ago. Only I said nothing about it—"

"Said nothing about it!" Granville echoed sourly. "If you'd had any idea so mighty as that nothing would have kept you quiet! And let me tell you, Bates, I don't like my own theories taken out of my mouth so promptly. Remember, you are not chief astronomer!"

"I'm hardly permitted to forget it," Stu retorted.

The staff grinned as they looked on. The Chief's eyes narrowed. He stood with his feet apart.

"What other *original* ideas did you have?" he asked dryly.

"That was the only one. If you don't believe I thought of it you can ask Miss Jane Carter, the television actress. She's my fiancée, and I told her all about it—"

"Oh, you did!" Granville exploded. "Then let me tell you something, Bates! Whatever your theories may be—and this one I do not believe in any case—it is your duty to state them first to the observatory board, to *me*—not to outsiders! Suppose you happened on something of world import? I suppose you'd tell it to this actress associate of yours first?"

Stu slammed down the wad of prints he was holding. He kept his voice level with difficulty.

"O.K., I'm through!" he blazed. "You and I never did hit it off, Mr. Granville, and now seems as good a time as any to call it quits. I've got other ideas further to the supra-universal being idea, but I'll be damned if I'll pass them on to you! Keep your blasted observatory and all that goes with it. That goes for you as its chief, too. Science! You don't know the first thing about it!"

"Collect your salary in lieu of notice from the cashier and get out," Granville breathed. "Maybe you'll learn in time not to steal other people's theories."

Stu swung round to the doorway, slammed the portal viciously in place and strode to the cashier's department. With his month's salary in his breast pocket he scrambled into hat and coat and emerged into the street.

It only began to percolate upon him as he walked along that he was really fired—fired by an ignoramus, when he, Stu, was the rightful heir to the title of Chief Astronomer. Pity kindly Professor Walters, Head Director of the Observatory Board, had been swayed by influence to institute Granville.

"Oh, hell!" Stu growled. "What's it matter anyway? Just let him try and solve scientific mysteries from now on! Will he get tied up! And anyway I have a new angle. Maybe I'm better

free, to work it out."

HE debated as he walked along, finally took a chance. Instead of going to his own apartment he headed for Jane Carter's place. To his delighted surprise the girl herself opened the door, gave him a smile of welcome.

"Well, Stu, you're lucky to catch me in; only been home a few minutes. What's on your mind? We're quite alone if it's anything important. Maid's night out, you know."

"I'm fired," Stu said, leading the way into the drawing room. "That idiot Granville got the same idea as me about an extra-universal being—once he'd heard that radio voice tonight. I told him I got the same idea days ago. Result—fired! Seems to think I was copying him. Not that I mind, of course."

"Maybe you were not very tactful," Jane murmured.

"Well, maybe not. Anyway, I've got more theories. I suppose you heard the voice on the radio tonight?"

"Oh, yes—but I doubt if anybody will listen to a plea for world disarmament. Presidents, dictators, and kings love those steel protections a good deal even if the people don't. I'll wager that rulers will think the thing a joke."

"The erysipelas plague isn't a joke."

"True. Just what are you getting at, Stu?"

"I'd like to fully convince myself that this erysipelas is produced by cosmic rays," he said thoughtfully. "That's part of my new theory. I can't quite see how cosmic rays could so suddenly increase to such power as to cause burns. The only way to check up is to travel up into the stratosphere—and that's where you come in. You've a private high level plane."

The girl smiled. "Up on the roof right now. I came home from the

studio in it as a matter of fact. It's all yours."

"You're game to come up into the stratosphere with me?"

"Why not? It's safe enough."

"Swell! Give me fifteen minutes while I dash home for a few pocket instruments. I'll join you on the roof."

WITHIN the time he had specified Stu returned, found the girl already seated in her neat, costly little stratosphere bus on the roof top parking space. She handed him a helmet and fur lined jacket, then he dropped in beside her and closed the airtight doors.

The girl gave the power to the engines. Without a sound the plane lifted into the night, swept upward through the busy traffic High Levels and into the darkness of the little frequented heights.

Stu glanced back once or twice toward the receding bowl of spotted light that was New York, then he turned to look at the altimeter. They were up 7 miles and still climbing rapidly. The exterior thermometer registered —60° F. Presently the girl closed the switches that allowed gas valves to operate and so inflate the emergency balloons on top of the machine, turning it into a gondola. It sailed up swiftly over the top of the troposphere layer into the stratosphere.

"I guess that thirty miles up, the top of the ozone layer, will be as much as we can manage," the girl said at last. "That do?"

"I think so." Stu was already at work with his small but accurate pocket instruments, working by the light of the illumined dashboard. Finally he shifted his position towards the window trap. Since most of the ship was solidly sheathed in radiation-proof linings, and the windows too were specially de-

vised to stop deadly free-space emanations, the test trap was the only useful position. Taking care to keep his hands sheltered he went to work.

Jane glanced at him once or twice as the machine reached the limit of its atmospheric rise. She saw him glance out of the window toward that brilliant, inhuman face, more clearly visible than it had ever been before.

"Say, that's queer!" he ejaculated finally. "My instruments show that the increase in cosmic rays, for this height, is about fourteen percent. That isn't enough to cause burns down on the earth, especially after traveling through the thick lower layers of air."

"Fourteen percent increase!" Jane echoed. "But—but why?"

"There's only one explanation," he answered slowly, thinking. "For some reason the Heavside Layer is thinner than it used to be. It also proves that the voice is *wrong* because fourteen percent cosmic wave increase could not burn a piece of paper, let alone flesh! Cosmic rays, then, are not the cause of erysipelas. It either means that the force of rays has been cut down, or else the voice told lies."

There was silence for a moment.

"Jane, I've a lot of thinking to do," Stu said pensively. "I think I've gotten onto something at last. Let's get back to earth."

She nodded silently and turned back to the controls, sent the machine slowly down from the heights.

BACK on the roof of the apartment block Stu stood for a while thinking, hand resting on the plane's body-work.

"Just what are you driving at, Stu?" the girl asked at last. "Are you trying to prove the face in the sky is a phony?"

"Just that," he assented quietly, straightening up. "I had a theory

about an extra-universal being before; now that's all washed up. But I'm not sure just what I *am* driving at."

"Well," the girl smiled, "you can always contact me by phone and I'll be ready to listen."

"Of course."

He went down with her to her apartment, left her shortly afterward. He pondered as he walked home through the busy streets; he was still at it when he entered his apartment and stood slowly taking off his gloves. Then he stopped, eyeing the right glove sharply in the bright light.

"What the . . ." he started to mutter. That glove was coated on the palm with a fine grayish blue dust.

For several seconds he stood puzzling, then he recalled how he had unconsciously placed his hand on the bodywork of Jane's plane. He turned swiftly, snatched the glove up, and headed for the little room that did service as an experimental laboratory.

His analysis did not take long.

"Barium platino-cyanide!" he whistled, his eyes gleaming. "The plane must have been covered in it. Boy! Is that something!"

IT was on the following day that the erysipelas plague took a turn for the worse. Several people, it was reported, had died from the ravages. Whatever it was causing the trouble—and most people believed the Face and cosmic rays were back of it—the sores produced on humanity became deeper and deeper, destroying vital nerve centers, arresting hearts' action, creating a toll of death in all directions.

Real worry dropped like a blanket over the world. People were afraid to venture outside, but still there were those who realized that it made no difference whether they were outside or in. So they went about their business with

vague pretensions to normalcy. But it was plainly evident that business had slowed up, that the pitch of life was altered. Terror was driving its roots deep into the western hemisphere, and to a less extent into the east. The Easterners were more stoic, even though they suffered as badly as anybody else. Only in the far north was there freedom, and hither there traveled vast armies of people.

Hundreds dying, a Face in the sky, and the solution was—voluntary disarmament. The Face had said so.

At the New York Observatory the egotistical Granville found himself hard pressed for explanations he could not give. Professor Walters, Head Director of the Board, was getting annoyed—seeing Granville for the irate buffoon he really was. He demanded that Stu Bates be found and brought back. But Stu wasn't coming back. At least not then. He had too many ideas of his own to work out.

He was convinced by now that he was on the track of the hottest scientific mystery of his generation. He went to work in his own individual way, piecing together bits and pieces of the problem as he had encountered them. He felt very much like a detective.

He also went to the length of buying several lengths of lead sheeting which he fashioned into a rough shield inside his little laboratory. So far he had escaped erysipelas; now he remained thoroughly convinced he was immune.

He began a study of his private notebook, in which through the years he had logged down all interesting events at the observatory. On this occasion it was the V-shaped wedge made on Pluto by a meteorite that held his interest. Time and again he read the notes he had written down, then he waded through a thick, clumsy volume on "Contemporary Astronomics."

"It's possible," he breathed at last, shutting the book with a bang; "but first I've got to make absolutely certain. Wonder if Jane is at home or the studio? Try home first."

He turned to the telephone, dialed Jane's apartment. The maid's voice came over the wire.

"Oh, hallo Maisie! This is Stu Bates. Miss Carter there?"

"Yes, sir, but— She can't answer the phone, Mr. Bates. She's ill—has been these last two days. The Plague's struck her."

"What!" Stu stared before him in stunned horror for a moment. "Why wasn't I told?" he demanded savagely. "Dammit, girl, I've got a telephone!"

"I rang again and again, sir, but there was no answer."

Stu gave an inward groan. He remembered now. Professor Walters had rung up twice to plead with him to return to the Observatory. When the telephone had kept on ringing he'd ignored it; clearly, it had been Maisie.

"You can't come here, you know," the maid's voice resumed. "It is against the law to contact a—"

"To hell with the law!" Stu retorted. "I'm coming!"

He slammed down the receiver and whirled into his hat and coat. For the moment everything else was forgotten. In fifteen minutes he arrived at the apartment. The quiet, trim Maisie eyed him anxiously.

"I would have come and told you, sir, only the law forbids me to leave a sick house, and—"

"Damn the law!" Stu bellowed. "Where's Jane?"

HE was shown into the girl's room. She lay in bed, her silvery flaxen hair draped on the white pillow. Her bare arms were covered in bandages, her white face labeled with plasters that

barely hid the hideous scars beneath.

"Hallo . . . Stu," she whispered in a faint voice. "Thank God you came. I—I couldn't let you know. I guess I'm in a pretty sorry mess!"

"What's the doctor say?" Stu demanded, breathing hard.

"What can he say? You know what this disease does. It just takes its course. I think I contracted it at the studio—"

"I can stop it!" Stu broke in tensely. "You need lead shields, like I've got. I'll make one for you! A little box and . . ."

Her bandaged hand reached out towards him slowly.

"I'm—I'm afraid it's too late for that, now," she muttered, her lips dry and flaky. "The doctor said it was only a question of hours before . . . before my heart is attacked. That—that means . . ."

"But this is idiotic!" Stu screamed. "I can't stand around and let you tell me you're going to die. God in Heaven, no!" He glared round savagely. "Where is that hell-fired doctor anyway? What's he mean leaving you alone like this with only a maid?"

"Maybe you've forgotten, Stu, that mine isn't an individual case. Nobody can have proper full-time attention these days."

Jane stopped, biting her lip at some inner anguish. Tears came into her eyes. Stu waited in silent mental torture until her paroxysm had passed. She spoke again, weak voiced.

"What—what made you ring up at last? Did you guess?"

He waved an impatient hand. "No—no, nothing like that. I wanted to borrow your plane again, as a matter of fact. I've a new slant and need a daylight test of the stratosphere."

"It's—it's parked on the roof. Take it, Stu—leave me alone for a bit.

Please. Maisie will look after me."

"Why doesn't somebody else come and help you?" Stu demanded desperately. "Your father for instance? He's only in Chicago. Where can I find him? What's he look like? I'll go get him—"

"He died yesterday," Jane said quietly.

Stu scratched his head, trying to collect his wits.

"Please make your experiment," the girl insisted. "I'll be all right until you get back. If you've any ideas at all please follow them through. All humanity might be saved. Even I might be saved."

That decided him. "O.K.!" he snapped, and swept past the somber Maisie in the doorway. From the corridor he headed to the roof top. It did not take above a moment or two to single out the girl's parked plane. He

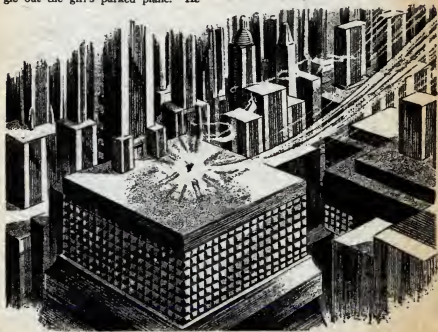
scrambled in, set forth his little array of instruments, then slammed the door. The engine roared.

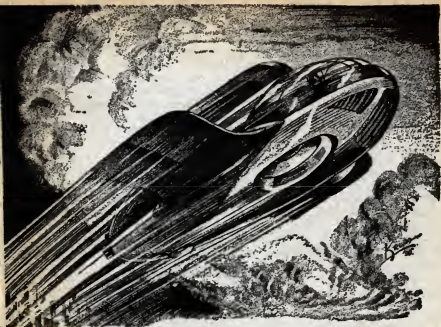
Set faced, he drove with dizzying speed into the morning sky.

Nor did he stop at the level of the previous night. He went up beyond the top of the ozone layer, aided by the maximum lifting power of the balloon buoys. At a height of 50 miles he stopped, staring at the black sky with its powdering of stars, then he donned dark glasses and studied the glaring, spotted sun.

The Face now was not visible, being on the other side of the world. Not that that interested him now. At length he went to work with his instruments before the window trap.

HE stood watching the movement of a testing needle, gave a deep whistle of triumph. Once more he





glanced at the black sky. The Heavyside Layer was thinner; by daylight the fact was obvious. The coloration of the infinite was darker than should normally have been the case. Instead of gray-black, the usual shade for this height, it had a darkness nearly approaching the incomprehensible black of outer space.

Stu smiled grimly to himself as he packed up his instruments. Then he sat at the controls again and returned to the rooftop parking ground.

Without a second's hesitation he raced into the building and down to Jane's apartment. He was surprised when the door opened to reveal a grave faced man with pince-nez.

"Oh—er—" Stu was momentarily at a loss for words.

"I'm Doctor Madison," the man volunteered, in a quiet voice. "I take it you are Mr. Bates?"

"Yes, but—"

"So the maid told me." The medico glanced back at the maid in the room as she sat on the divan with a handkerchief to her face. "I'm sorry, young man," he went on seriously, "but—well, I was summoned ten minutes ago. I arrived too late."

Stu felt himself go white. He caught at the doorpost.

"You don't mean that—that Jane—?"

Dr. Madison nodded slowly.

Stu spoke mechanically. "Can—can I see her?"

"You may look from the door, certainly, but the law forbids contact with anyone suffering from the plague, be they alive or dead. Actually, you had no right to come into contact with Miss Carter before, but we'll waive that."

Stu walked to the bedroom door in a daze, stood looking at the still figure in the bed, the sheet drawn up over her

face. For several seconds he remained motionless, biting his lip. The only sounds in the world were the deep breathing of the doctor and Maisie's muffled weeping.

He turned at last, stupidly. "I'll—I'll have to arrange the funeral details," he muttered. "Her father's dead and—I was her fiance."

"I understand that the television studios have arranged the funeral," Madison said quietly. "She was a famous star, you know."

"Yeah—yeah of course. O.K., thanks. I'll—have to think it out."

Stu dried up completely. He turned away and went down the corridor, lost to the world. Suddenly, on the very verge of what he knew was the solution to the Face in the sky, his life had fallen in pieces. He was stunned, bereft of the power to think.

CHAPTER III

Disarm—Or Die!

STU could not think properly for nearly a week afterwards. He attended the immense funeral accorded the girl, saw her coffin lowered into the earth. More than that he could not stand. He fled back to his apartment, spent days fretting round in his little lead protected laboratory trying to collect his demoralized thoughts, trying to force his mind to marshal together the facts he had obtained.

It was while he fought this battle with himself that things rose to a dangerous pitch in the world around him. He was aware of them as events detached, through radio reports and television. On the very night that Jane had died the voice had spoken again, repeating its command for the destruction of armaments or death to humanity through cosmic rays.

Stubborn government leaders challenged the Face, the so-called extra-universal being, to do its worst. They would not consent to destroy armaments. *They* would not, no—but a humanity tortured by insufferable burns, forced to watch their loved ones perish under the influence of the unknown, demanded action. Deputations rose up in America, England, and Europe, swept in mobs against the portals of government and screamed for the destruction of armaments.

The demand was coldly refused.

And as the hordes demonstrated, as Stu moodily gazed from his window upon the almost paralyzed city of New York with its surging, angry people, most of them disease stricken, the Face loomed over it all, bigger than it had ever been, filling all the evening sky. A sky that was all brooding eyes, tight lipped mouth and cruel jaw. Never had a more incredible vision loomed in the heavens of man.

Slowly, Stu began to drag himself out of his depression. In his hands was a possible solution to all this. Jane would have wanted him to carry on. There were millions of Janes in the country, perhaps doomed to die as she had. He turned, tight lipped, suddenly the master of himself again.

He could not work here with the babble of an excited population disturbing him. Methodically, he collected together all the stuff he needed, including his lead shields, packed all the stuff in his car then started off for his shack in the Adirondacks. The quieter atmosphere of the country cleared his brain a little. He drove at a moderate speed, ignored the silent people he occasionally passed as they stood looking up in horrified fascination at the Face looming over all the land.

And now, away from the screening edifices of the city, he saw a peculiar-

ity about that Face that arrested his attention. The lower half of it was obliterated by a perfect curve, which made the chin taper down on each side to pointed ends and cut the center squareness right out. For a long time it puzzled him as he drove along; then as the deepening bay of dark spread slowly up the Face, allowing the stars to show in the dark portion, a gleam of understanding came into his eyes.

He stepped on the gas and drove with an impatient savagery through the deepening night, reached his isolated foothill hut at last and passed inside, switched on the mountain stream-driven generator. The lights came up.

Throwing off his hat and coat he set to work with notepad and pencil, working right from the beginning of the problem to the existing conditions. An hour later he sat back, pondering.

"If my guess is right the Face will be directly overhead in two more nights," he muttered. "At a height of one hundred miles, and a stratosphere bus will only do fifty. How to get up a hundred miles?"

That stumped him for a moment. Then out of the mist of memory came an observation Jane had once made.

"In that radio apparatus you've got the basis of remote control anyway. You could control anything for a hundred miles and more."

He snapped his fingers in decision, twisted round and began a search of the bench. At last he found what he wanted—the model rocket he had made for early space flying experiments, lying now with its discharge cylinders forlornly empty.

"But not for long!" he breathed, snatching it up. "Boy, this is going to tell me something!" He gave it an affectionate pat, then set to work with his tools. He wielded them far into the night, only stopping toward dawn when

he grew too weary to concentrate. Before he retired he gave a final glance out of the window. The Face was still there to the north, but a quarter of it was obliterated by curved, starlit dark.

"Face!" he snorted contemptuously. "Hell, and to think I once thought of an extra-universal being. I must have been nuts!"

With that he threw himself on his bunk and fell into exhausted slumber.

IT was on the following day, as Stu worked away isolated from the world, that Governments were forced into concerted action by the people they controlled. Seeing the higher ups would not of themselves take any steps to obey the commands of the Unknown, the people acted for themselves. They paraded in vast armies, laid hold on their particular country's armaments and began a rampage of destruction.

Throughout the day the true nature of the rank and file of earth's humanity became revealed. Rulers looked on helplessly as countless millions of dollars' worth of material was blown up, fired, wrecked, or sunk. The average man and woman, realizing the choice lay between death or the obliteration of war menace, acted with savage promptness. Nation joined nation as the average man and woman went to work in yelling, resolute hordes and invaded the armament factories that had so long loomed over them like Golgothas of steel.

Even to Stu's ears, far though he was from the city, there came the sound of violent concussions as munition works were blown sky high. His television, which he consulted from time to time, brought to him scenes that were staggering in their import. He saw sudden and absolute disarmament. He saw views of monstrous ships of war sinking at sea. Scenes flashed from the Amer-

icas, from Europe, from Britain, from Pole to Pole indeed. Planes were crashing, munition works vomiting flame and destruction, millions upon millions of people milling around in fanatically enthusiastic myriads, intent on destroying the substance of the shadow that had so long fallen across their progress. Nothing else mattered. Business, normal routine, pleasures—all that was swept away in a mad orgy of obedience to the Face in the sky, and Common Sense!

The disarmament went on far into the night with its thunders and concussions. The sky was livid with red. And the Face was there again, taking account of everything—or so the hoarse voiced announcer declared over the radio. Stu glanced at the man's worried face in the televisor, then smiled bitterly.

"Wonder just how gullible the average man is?" he murmured, and peered through the window. As on the previous night, the Face was half obliterated by a circle of dark; and this night the dark had encroached further than ever. On the next night, according to Stu's calculations, the Face would be at its closest.

Throughout the night, and all through the next day, the destruction of armaments went on. Years of work, fortunes in money, were destroyed in those hours by war sick millions. Cannons ran in rivers of molten steel, shells exploded harmlessly in the sea. Engines of war were blasted asunder. In something like sixty hours the desperate arms' race of half a century was wiped out. The people were satiated. They waited—for relief, went home under the smoke ridden skies. They waited for the first word telling them the Plague had stopped. They had obeyed the command and eradicated armaments, even if it had been against the

wish of their war-minded rulers.

But relief did not come. The erysipelas plague was still going on. Bitter, smoldering with resentment, the people of the world awaited an explanation. It came in the late evening.

STU had his radio on, also waiting. In Silence he sat listening as the static ridden bass voice rumbled forth across the interplay of electric forces.

"People of Earth, you have done well. You have obeyed. You have realized the folly of war and destruction. The cosmic ray attack will cease in two more days. The cosmic forces have indeed been stopped already, but such is our distance from you it will take two days before you notice the benefit. I am satisfied. From now on I shall withdraw, a process which to you will seem as slow as my approach."

Stu switched off as the voice ceased, sat grimly smiling to himself.

"Of course you'll withdraw, because you can't do anything else!" he said slowly. "And of course the erysipelas will stop in two more days because there won't be enough sunspots to keep it going! Cunning and clever—but what's back of it?"

He shrugged, got to his feet and picked up his rocket projectile. He gave a final once over to the firing cylinders and the remote control pickup mechanism he had embodied. Finally he satisfied himself the thing was dead in tune with his radio transmission waves.

Tugging open the door he carried the rocket outside and centered it on the heavens. Directly overhead was the Face, three-quarters of it eliminated by a circle of black through which stars shone. He surveyed it pensively, stared round the deserted landscape and monoliths for a moment, then ignited the rocket's firing cylinders. In a second

or two it hurtled upward with a swoosh of air.

Reaching inside the door, watching the tiny, receding spot of flame that marked the rocket's position, he operated the dials of his radio transmitter, controlled the experimental tube on its flight into the loftiest levels of the earth's atmosphere.

Precalculation of the rocket's speed and distance of the Face revealed to him exactly when the rocket had reached as high—and higher—than the Face. Only then did he handle his controls more delicately, knew that the flying tube had opened a small container and close it again. Then he guided his investigator slowly back to the earth, until it fell gently outside the shack door.

Instantly he raced with it into the bright light, tugged off the container top and shook out a little heap of blue-gray crystals.

"Barium platino-cyanide *crystals!*" he yelled. "Last time it was dust. I was right! The Face is made up of these crystals! It doesn't live, and never did! Everything, except the voice, fits in!"

He stood brooding over the stuff, brows knitted, trying to fit in the last pieces of the problem. Then at last he rose from his profound thought as above the drone of his generators he heard the sound of approaching feet on the mountain path. He turned sharply, just in time to see three men come through the doorway.

ONE of them he immediately recognized as Professor Walters, head director of the Observatory Board. The other two looked like officials of some kind or other.

"Why, Professor!" Stu cried, amazed. "How did you know I was here?"

Walters' broad, kindly face was troubled.

"I'm afraid your own radio speech brought us here," he said quietly. "These two gentlemen are from radio headquarters. The voice transmission tonight came through well enough to be properly located. It came from here. Naturally we do not need to look further. Your generators are still running. Bates, just why did you do it?"

Stu stared, open mouthed. "But—but this is ridiculous, sir! I never caused that voice. I'm still trying to figure it out. I have solved everything but that."

"The voice came from these mountains, approximately here," said one of the officials. "We took a plane here immediately. Since these mountains are higher than the general land it naturally looked as if the voice came from the north and from above."

Stu scratched his head in bewilderment. Then Walters moved forward.

"Bates," he said, in his level voice, "you say you have solved everything else. If you have, you've accomplished a miracle. I have arrived at no conclusions and certainly Granville did not. I had the Board dismiss him as a matter of fact. Just what *have* you found out?"

"Plenty! First, what do you figure the Face is?"

"I don't know. No scientists believe it is a genuine face, of course, but its exact nature is a mystery. What are your views?"

Stu smiled contentedly, felt it was ample repayment for his work to have the big man standing there listening to him.

"You may remember the recordings of a V-shaped wedge on Pluto some time ago?"

"I remember. A meteor, wasn't it?"

"A meteor of tremendous size col-

lided with Pluto and chipped out a V-shaped piece. Pluto, you may recall, has a considerable percentage of platinum and barium in its makeup, and what slight atmosphere it does possess is mainly cyanogen.* Doesn't that suggest to you that a good deal of Pluto's surface and subsurface would be composed of barium-cyanide? Cyanogen gas unites easily with metallic ores, you know."

Walters raised his hushy eyebrows in some surprise, nodded slowly.

"That meteor," Stu went on keenly, "smashed a huge piece out of Pluto. The piece became dust, drifting in a big sea in space. A sea of barium platino-cyanide crystals. The meteor went on into space, invisible. It happened, by the sheerest of coincidence I admit, that that dust formed into the outlines of a face, and there is no wind in space to disturb dust, so it just remained. You follow, sir?"

"Ah-ha," the big man acknowledged.

"As anybody knows, barium platino-cyanide is fluorescent when reacted upon by X-rays. It happened that that dust was released in space simultaneously with the sun developing extreme sunspots. Eddington showed us long ago that X-rays increase enormously when sunspots are prolific, and never in the sun's history have spots been so prolific as recently. First, they created violent electric storms in the stratosphere; they weakened it a great deal. Then the X-rays reached out across space far enough to touch that barium dust. It fluoresced, glowed, and looked to us like a giant face. At the same time the rays were coming to Earth from the spots and passed easily through the weakened Heaviside Layer, causing what looked like erysipelas, actually X-ray burning."

THE three men were leaning forward now in intense interest.

"It was *not* cosmic rays," Stu said quickly. "Cosmic rays had increased fourteen percent, and that was not enough to burn anybody. The weaker Heaviside Layer was responsible, of course. It showed me that the voice had told lies, anyway. Naturally, Earth was drifting closer to the dust field all the time—and tonight it is as close as it ever will be.

"I got the first clue when I found that erysipelas was striking the world. X-rays might be the cause, I thought, particularly as in the sunless Arctic there was no sign of the disease. X-rays might react on crystals suspended in space. A night test of the stratosphere showed no signs of X-rays because the sun was on the other side of the earth. Because of its distance away, the crystal cloud was affected by solar X-rays just the same. The Earth was not then casting a shadow on it. That came later, when the Face was really near. When I saw the Face being eclipsed by the Earth, as it blocked the X-rays from the sun, I tumbled to the idea that the Face was a phony.

"Actually, I had had a guide before that. Parts of the dust had drifted through space and the plane I experimented in had barium dust on it. By daylight I found X-rays very prevalent, and so decided to protect myself with lead shields. Well, the composition of Pluto, X-rays, and erysipelas all seemed to fit the Face. To make completely sure I sent test rocket into the Face; it came back with a load of barium crystals inside it. That cinched it."

Walters stood in thoughtful silence.

"Certainly a fine piece of scientific, deductive reasoning," he said at last. "And entirely accurate because the points hold together. But Bates, about the voice?"

* Lexy's "Speculations on Pluto."

Stu shook his head.

"That's had me licked all along. Back of the voice there must be somebody who had reasoned it out like me and took advantage of a natural phenomenon to make the world disarm. A laudable idea, of course, but how it was accomplished I don't know. The voice said tonight the cosmic ray attack—so called—would end in two days. That's correct, because sunspots will then have gotten to the place where X-ray attack will diminish enormously. The Face too will recede because we are already past the barium field of dust. But the voice—"

Stu stopped suddenly. His eye had caught the detector needle of the radio, as he had switched it off after listening to the voice. He jumped forward, stared at it as it pointed upward and northward.

"Of course!" he cried hoarsely, swinging round. "Sure it points above—*higher up this mountain range!* The main range is slightly northward of here and I'm only in the foothills. That's where the real source of the voice is! Come on!"

HE snatched down hat and coat and led the way outside. Talking eagerly among themselves the four of them blundered up the mountain activity, watching keenly as they went, their way well lighted by the half eclipsed Face in the sky above them.

Higher they went, and higher, always northward. For an hour, for two, for three, into the upper reaches of the Adirondacks. They calculated they must have ascended at least 1800 ft. above Stu's foothill shack before Walters in the forefront, suddenly stopped and pointed ahead to a level stretch skirting a precipice.

Upon it, clearly revealed, though the windows were in darkness, was a good

sized shack.

"There!" he cried, as excited as a schoolboy. "Come on!"

He raced forward and reached the door, thundered imperiously upon it. At last there came a quick sound from within, the sound of bolts shooting back, then the portal swung wide and permitted a flood of light to stream in the dark.

Against it stood a tall figure in a smock. Stu pushed past into the light, then stopped dead. The man was Dr. Madison!

Stu twisted round to stare into a room replete with radio and other machinery. But to the machinery he paid no heed. His whole gaze was centered on the figure at the far corner. Jane Carter! Pale, yes, but unscarred, and certainly very much alive.

"Jane!" Stu's voice split the sudden silence.

She came forward, smiling a little. Stu felt his heart racing wildly as he reached out and touched her. She was solid all right.

"No—no," he panted. "I'm going nuts or something. I—Who are you, anyway?" he demanded, whirling round on Madison.

The man smiled a little. "David Carter, Jane's father. I guess this is a terrific shock to you, Stu, but—"

"Shock! It's mad—insane!" Stu shouted. "I saw Jane buried and then—"

"No, Stu, you didn't," the girl interposed quietly. "You saw a coffin buried, but I wasn't in it. Matter of fact I was here at the time."

"Suppose you start in to explain things, Mr. Carter?" Walters asked quietly. "I gather you are responsible for the voice?"

CARTER inclined his head. "We have done nothing wrong, my

daughter and I. We only destroyed the menace of war forever and brought a saner balance to the people of the world. A finer civilization will rise out of it. The erysipelas was not our doing either; the sun caused it."

"I'm aware of that now," Walters nodded. "But what's the reason for all this?"

"Yes! What?" Stu demanded, throwing an arm round Jane's shoulders.

"The only way to go to work at the vital moment was to maintain strict secrecy," the girl herself said quickly. "I couldn't even let you into it, Stu, in case you accidentally let something slip. So I pretended to die. With make up, false scars, and what bit of acting ability I possess it was not very difficult. Father, as a bogus doctor, did the rest. You never saw me closely after my supposed death, remember. - And Maisie was in the know."

"Ingenious, but what's the idea?" Stu snapped.

"We maintained secrecy in case we should be accused of the X-ray attack, for which of course we were not responsible," said Carter. "Jane here relayed to me your theory of an extra-universal being, and I decided I could use it to build up my own idea. You see, long ago I knew the Face was not genuine. I have always loathed the drift toward war. I calculated I might, with a bit of luck and ingenuity, force humanity into disarmament. I accomplished it in the way you know. I've had this shack up here for years, experimenting with methods for interplanetary communication—just as you have, lower down the mountain range."

"But the voice!" Stu cried.

"That was easy," Jane smiled. "At the studio we often make voices which have no person to utter them by impressing the appropriate sound waves

on film then running the film over a photoelectric apparatus in the fashion of talking pictures. I had no difficulty in learning from a technician how to create a voice of terrific depth; simplest thing in the world. You can make any sound with the correct film technique.

"The first message was run through by father up here when I was with you, and he made it faint to give the impression of distance. When I handed him your extra-universal being idea he decided to use it and made some appropriate speeches."

"Naturally I took a long chance," Carter smiled. "If the disarmament had not taken place before the end of the sunspot X-ray attack I would have been stumped."

"For such knowledge you must have a tremendous grasp of science," Walters remarked, frowning.

"Just what I'm thinking," Stu said in surprise. "Jane told me you were a lawyer in Chicago, sir."

Carter smiled. "Ever heard of Felminoff?" he asked briefly.

"Not *the* Felminoff, the famous scientist, theorist, and pacifist!" Walters cried.

"I'm afraid so," Carter chuckled. "Only, like any man, I do not like ridicule. I was afraid that was what I would get when some of my theories were published so I assumed a name. Also I thought it better to keep the name of Carter out of it—in relation to myself—when Jane became famous. Nobody could say she'd gotten her success because of a famous parent. See?"

Stu began to grin. "No wonder you had it all doped out!" he cried. "Gosh, if only I'd known you were trying to do interplanetary radio! Now I see where Jane gets her scientific—"

He stopped suddenly, staring in front of him. He glanced up suddenly at the

scientist.

"Say, maybe we've both been wrong!" he cried. "Why bother with radio? In one of your treatises you suggested signs— Well, why not? Fire a sign of barium cyanide into space and activate it with X-rays! That will surely attract a Martian or Venusian?"

Carter snapped his fingers. "You've

hit it! It never even occurred to me."

"Then the Face has served a useful purpose after all," said Walters, smiling. "And the rest of the world will never know what has taken place in this shack tonight. As to you, Stu, I want you to come back to the Observatory as chief astronomer and—"

He stopped, coughing slightly.

For Stu had not even been listening. Neither had Jane. They were enfolded in each others' arms.

THE WORLD THAT DISSOLVED

(Continued from page 93)

recalled Curt Vernol, and with the recollection came a vast wave of bitter self-reproach. He did not regret slaying Vernol; he'd been too inquisitive anyway—but he did curse himself for a fool for having fired him away into the void in his ship. He had thrown away his one means of escape. . . .

Thrown away everything!

Dazedly, he stared at the hole. It was expanding with terrific speed. The small hills ringed it round. It was advancing inexorably toward him. Before long the planetoid itself would crack in half.

Death was inevitable. Gaunt realized it now—but *death*, when he had expected so much! He fancied he could hear Curt Vernol laughing at him. Perhaps his spirit still pervaded this crumbling world—

Gaunt shook himself. This was pure fancy. Things had gone against him, yes, but in a perfectly logical fashion. But that did not make matters any better.

Suddenly he was calm again, faced the situation. He had done wrong: he realized it now. But he was still a scien-

tist, and he still had the courage that had led him to take this lonely job and at the same time defy interplanetary laws. Even if his private aims had collapsed, even if he had committed cold blooded murder, he still loved the profession that was closest to his heart.

Mastering himself, he tugged a safety cylinder from his belt, removed the curved plate from within it and started to work with the stylus. There was no reason why science should not know of the thing he had discovered. Someday, perhaps, the cylinder would be picked up—granting it missed being annihilated when the planetoid collapsed.

At last he had finished his message, packed it carefully into the cylinder, then fired the small rocket attached to it. In grim immovability he watched it soar away into the darkness above him.

He looked back at the hole, smiled twistedly. At any moment now the whole planetoid would break in pieces.

Slowly he got to his feet, slid down the black rocks, walked steadily toward that abysmal circle.

The eternal stars watched him go.



SIDNEY, the Screwloose Robot

by

WILLIAM P. McGIVERN

Sidney, the robot, was perfect in every detail, except for one thing—he had a screw loose! Which made a difference . . .

STRETCHED out on the workbench he—I almost said “it”—looked just like one of those illustrations you see in science fiction magazines. You know the kind . . . robots with jointed arms and legs, cylindrical steel bodies and bucket-like heads, generally caught by the artists in the act of crushing their creators.

But Sidney—why we called him that I don't know—was not a picture. He was the real McCoy. A living, thinking robot. Our tests had just proved that beyond any doubt.

I gazed down at him paternally. I don't suppose he was actually any more handsome than a polished-up garbage can, but to me he was the most beautiful sight in the world. Family pride, I guess.

I heard my partner, Dave Wright, draw a deep trembly breath behind me. I looked at him and smiled at the somehow, ludicrous expression that was stamped on his fat pear-shaped face.

“Well,” I said, “it's all over but the shouting. Sidney hits an all six so I guess that makes fathers out of us—or something.”

“Yeah,” Dave continued to gaze solemnly at Sidney. “Do you think we ought to pass out cigars—or something?”

I laughed and slapped him on the back. In spite of our clowning this was probably the biggest moment of our respective lives. For four years Dave and I had slaved to prove that the creation of rational robot life was more than just a wild dream.

And now we had before us the tangible evidence that our years of toil and sacrifice had not been wasted. Important also was the fact that our success had arrived just in time to save our financial as well as our scientific standing. Bills had been piling up for months and our only hope had been to get Sidney ready in time to exhibit at the science convention. If the judges considered Sidney a useful, productive addition to society—and we knew they would—we would be eligible for a fellowship that would enable us to continue our experimental research free from the spectre of impatient creditors and nagging collectors.

"Come on," I said jubilantly, "let's have a drink. Every father is entitled to that much after pacing the floor all night. We'll connect Sidney up again when we come back. We've got to get an early start on his education, y'know."

"About his education," Dave said later, as I poured him two fingers—up and down—of Scotch, "just how much will we have to teach him?"

I scratched my head.

"That's kind of hard to say. We know of course that he has an adult brain. We'll have to explain a lot of things to him, but I'm not anticipating any trouble on that score. Our big job is to make him appreciate his responsibility and obligation to mankind. We've got to teach him to work."

"And we've got to prove to the judges at the convention that he can and will work or we won't have a chance at that fellowship."

"It sounds like a big order," Dave said dubiously.

I drained my glass.

"It is," I said. "So let's get back and hook him up. The sooner he gets to work the better."

IN the lab, Dave made the necessary adjustments under Sidney's metal scalp and then slid it back into place. In a few seconds we heard the faint humming noise that emanated from the brain coils and then Sidney opened his eyes and sat up.

We had introduced ourselves in the first experiment, so there was a gleam of recognition in his eye as he regarded us.

"Well here we are again," I said rather inanely. "How do you feel?"

"Oh fine," Sidney answered vaguely. "How do you feel?"

Dave nudged me.

"Hear that? Smart as a whip."

Sidney apparently heard this, for his metal mouth slit parted in a wide smile. He stared with new friendliness at Dave.

"Now Sidney," I said hurriedly. "We have several important things to tell you. First of all you are a robot. You must always remember that. You must be industrious, you must be efficient, you must be useful. These are the three laws that are to govern your behavior. In short you must make up your mind to work."

"What was that last word?" Sidney asked, and I thought I detected a note of apprehension in his voice. "It's got a kind of a nasty ring to it. What is it?"

"Work," I repeated. "Work."

"It doesn't sound very pleasant," Sidney said, and then I was sure there was apprehension in his voice. "Tell me about it."

"Well," I said, "the best illustration I can give you—"

I stopped. Sidney was stretching himself out on the table.

He looked up in embarrassment as my voice trailed off. "I'm sorry," he said apologetically. "I just feel a little better when I lay flat. You don't mind do you?"

"Maybe he's just like a growing boy," Dave said rather weakly. "You know," his voice faltered as he looked at me, "tired all the time."

"Sure," I said. I looked back at Sidney. He had thrown one metal arm across his eyes. "Light bothering you?" I asked and I'm afraid there was a distinctly cold edge to my voice.

"It's all right," Sidney's voice sounded muffled. "I can stand it. Tell me some more about this work business."

Dave smiled at me triumphantly.

"See," he whispered. "You've got him interested."

"Well," I started again, "by work we mean, well, for instance, just what we're doing now."

Sidney removed his arm from his eyes.

"Oh," he said relievedly, "is that all? You had me worried for a while."

"Don't get me wrong," I said grimly. "You're not working now. We are. When you start to work it will be much different. You'll carry bundles, mow the lawn, scrub the floors, things like that to start with. Then when you get a little experience we'll get you a job in a factory. Then you'll learn how to operate machinery, handle tools, make yourself generally useful."

Sidney raised himself on one elbow and stared at me.

"For Heaven's sake," he gasped. "Why?"

"Why?" I sputtered. "Because that's what you've been created for. Don't you want to become a productive member of society. Don't you want to work?"

"Do you?" Sidney asked incredulously.

Well, I tell you it almost floored me. I looked helplessly at Dave and he wiped the smile from his face.

"Go on," he said innocently "tell him how much you love to work."

Sidney was shaking his head bewilderedly as he lay down again.

I BEGAN to get a little uneasy. Somehow I'd got off on the wrong foot but I intended to erase any false impressions I'd created. I explained the whole set up to Sidney again, but this time I was really eloquent.

I pictured to him the inspiring prospect of a world of robots lifting the burden of drudgery from the shoulders of mankind, leaving man free to devote his leisure to the arts and sciences. I was pretty terrific and I noticed that

Sidney's restlessness seemed to be disappearing. He seemed to be lost in thought.

Encouraged, I soared on.

"It is the golden age again," I proclaimed, "and it is to be your glorious privilege to be the first of man's metallic brethren to lift from his aching shoulders the burden that—"

Ssssssh," it was Dave's voice hissing warningly behind me.

"Eh?" I broke off and looked at him blankly. "What's up?"

"Sidney's asleep," he whispered. "Tone down or you'll wake him up."

"What!" I shouted. I wheeled back to Sidney. It was true. Not sleep as we know it, but a passive state resulting from total inactivity of brain cells that duplicates the symptoms of human sleep.

"Let's leave him alone," Dave said softly. "He's all tuckered out. We can try again tomorrow."

"I hope we do better than we did today," I said wearily. "We've got to get him working right or we won't have a chance at that fellowship." I turned to leave then and I noticed a tiny object glittering at my feet. I picked it up and saw that it was a small screw.

"Where'd this come from?" I asked Dave.

Dave peered at it for an instant and then a horrified look spread over his face.

"I just remembered," he cried wildly. "I lost it when I was assembling Sidney's brain this morning. I intended to look for it later but everything fitted all right," he spread his hands helplessly, "so I forgot it. Can't we take him apart and see—"

"Not a chance," I cut in. "We might never get him ready in time for the convention. We'll have to take a chance on teaching him as is." I looked down at the screw in my hand and then at

Sidney's peacefully recumbent figure. "A sweet set up," I muttered bitterly. "All our hopes pinned on him—and he's got a screw loose."

THE next morning I didn't waste any time. I routed Sidney out of the lah and led him down to the hase-ment. I introduced him to a pile of logs and an axe and told him what I wanted. I left him gazing moodily at the wood and I returned a half hour later to see how he was progressing.

Sidney was asleep in the coal bin!

I jerked him to his feet and put him to carrying out ashes. He dropped the first basket in the middle of the living room, stumbled over it and fell into a chair that collapsed under his weight. I found him there, ten minutes later, still sprawled on the floor gazing sorrowfully at the chaos he had created.

No one could possibly have guessed from my expressionless face that something inside of me was slowly withering away. It was my cherished dream of productive, useful robot life turning up its toes.

"That'll be all, Sidney," I said heavily, "for today."

He brightened up.

"Fine," he said. "I think I'll catch forty winks down in the basement where it's cool." He clanked out of the room just as Dave walked in.

I slumped into a chair and told Dave what had happened.

"And," I concluded, "what the hell can we do?"

"You expect too much," Dave said. "We'll just have to give him a little more time. I feel sure he'll improve."

"He'd better," I said, "or we might just as well start looking for a nice cozy debtor's prison in which to spend the winter."

"Don't worry," Dave said confidently, "he'll do better."

Dave, it turned out, was a poor prophet. As the days raced by Sidney got steadily worse. Threats, bribery, cajolery all failed. Sidney was a hopeless case. He lay around in the shade with an asinine expression on his metal features, evidently quite pleased with things. Finally I threw up the sponge.

"I'm through," I stormed at Dave. "We may as well face the facts. Sidney is nothing but a worthless, lazy hum. If I was sure of my moral grounds I'd put him out of his misery with an acetylene torch."

Dave was shocked.

"You couldn't do that," he protested. "Why I may be crazy, but I can't help liking the big lug. I feel like, well," he paused and shuffled his feet awkwardly, "almost like he was a son of mine."

That was the night that Sidney disappeared.

WE missed him just before supper and after a hasty search through the house and garage we sat down to eat. It wasn't a pleasant meal. After a few mouthfuls I pushed my plate away and stood up.

"Where the devil could he be?" I muttered more to myself than Dave. "It isn't like him to walk away. He might ride, but he hates walking like poison."

At eight o'clock I was just crossing to the telephone to call the police when Dave held up his hand.

"What's that noise?" he asked nervously.

I heard it then, and as I recognized it a cold sweat started trickling down my ribs. Through the window came the sound of a voice, a tinny, bleary voice singing:

For he's a jolly good fellowooooo-
oow—
which nobooooody can deeeet—ny.

Dave beat me to the window and as he jerked aside the curtain my astounded eyes encountered a sight that will be stamped on my memory forever. Sidney was standing in front of the house, weaving crazily about, and as we watched in mingled astonishment and horror, he started up the stone walk that led to the door. And then we could see something was radically wrong with him.

He lurched forward, staggering with every step to keep his balance and then he stopped and stared at the house as if he were seeing it for the first time.

"Helloooooo," he bawled at the top of his unmusical voice. "Helloooooo, house." He bowed low and almost fell on his face.

"Ye Gods," I groaned. "What's the matter with him?" I wheeled from the window and opened the door just in time to meet Sidney face to face as he staggered the last few steps up the stone walk.

He blinked owlishly at me and then giggled.

"Hello." He peered solemnly about and then turned to me and placed one finger over his lips. "Ssssssh," he whispered, "gotta keep quiet." He hiccupped violently and almost toppled over. "Howsh about a lil' drink?" he beamed happily. "Noshin' like a lil' drink to fiz ya up."

"Sidney," I said desperately, "what's happened to you?"

He giggled coily.

"Just ha' a lil' drink."

He swayed precariously and then as he raised his arm I saw what he was holding in his hand.

A gallon of penetrating oil!

And as I stared at it in bewilderment he raised it to his lips and took a long swig.

I jerked the can away from him and grabbed him by the arm to prevent him

from falling. Dave, who had been watching in open-mouthed astonishment, grabbed his other arm and between the two of us we dragged Sidney into the house.

"To the lab," I snapped. "I don't know what he's been doing but I've got an awful suspicion."

We stretched him out on the lab table and I wiped the grease from his mouth and chest.

"What's the matter with him?" Dave cried. "He acts like—like he's drunk."

"He is," I said dully. "He's as drunk as a lord!"

"BUT how," Dave gasped. "How . . . I mean he's a robot. He can't—"

"Sure he's a robot," I cut in bitterly. I picked up the can of oil that Sidney had carried away from the lab and handed it to Dave. "See that. It's penetrating oil. He found it here, started drinking it instead of his usual heavy grease. With the result that all of his gears and wheels began to revolve at about three times their normal speed."

"Well I'll be darned," Dave gasped incredulously. "He's oiled up."

"That's just it," I said. "He gets the same kick from thin oil that you or I would from alcohol." I waved my hands helplessly. "On top of being a lazy, good-for-nothing loafer, he's taken to drink."

"Now don't be too hard on him," Dave said. "There's nothing wrong with a young guy goin' on a tear every now and then. He's just sowing a few wild oats."

"I suppose he'll get a bumper crop of rivets," I said sarcastically.

"Aw, don't—" Dave's voice choked in his throat. "Look," he managed to yell.

Sidney was threshing and twisting

around on the bench. Streams of crazed, incoherent words were pouring out of his mouth and a froth of oil bubbled over his metal lips.

"Hold him down," I yelled. "He's going crazy."

We grabbed him by the arms and held him as firmly as we could but his head continued to roll wildly on his neck.

"Thousands and thousands," he groaned. Thousands and thousands coming after me. On the wall, on the ceiling, on the floor. Thousands of 'em. Points, points, sharp points coming after me."

"What are you talking about?" Dave shouted at him.

"Pink can openers," Sidney screamed. "Pink can openers, thousands of pink can openers coming after me. Points, points, pink points coming for me."

I let go of his arms and staggered back, wiping my forehead with a shaking hand.

"By the great Jehovah," I gasped, "Sidney's got the D.T.'s."

"You mean delirium tremens," Dave demanded, "from too much liquor?"

I nodded bitterly and stared at Sidney's moaning, twitching figure. There lay our years of work and sacrifice. We had dreamed of creating a useful addition to mankind in the form of robot life. Instead we had produced a drunken bum who would never do anything worthwhile in his life except boost the stock of Standard Oil.

A WEEK later Dave and I sat in the living room and stared gloomily at one another. The representative of the Finance Company had just left. So had his truck. So had our equipment.

The convention was to open the following day and Sidney—

"Where's Sidney?" I asked dully.

"In the lab," Dave answered dispiritedly.

"Is he sober?"

"He was when I left him."

"That's fine," I said bitterly. "If he stays sober another hour he'll break his own record. Then we can get him a temperance badge and a membership in the W. C. T. U."

The last week had been hell. After his first binge Sidney had been repentant, but it hadn't lasted. We couldn't keep him away from the oil. He'd find it no matter where we hid it and we were afraid to lock it up for fear he might be tempted to wander into the village and steal some.

Gone was any hope of entering him in the convention. We'd be the laughing stock of the scientific world if we took Sidney down there.

Our equipment was gone. More creditors were nipping at our heels with foreclosures and attachments. It looked like Waterloo. And all on account of Sidney.

"I'm going to get a hack saw," I said grimly, "and commit mayhem on that drunken bum."

"You couldn't do that," Dave said accusingly. "He's a good egg. You gotta admit he's kind of funny at times."

"Funny?" I almost screamed. "So are the Marx brothers. I don't want a funny man. If I did I'd turn on the Jack Benny program. All I want is a sensible, sober, unobtrusive robot. But what do I get, what do I get—?"

"You got me!"

The metallic voice was followed by a few unmusical clanks and then Sidney clumped into the room.

"You!" I said bitterly. "Baaah!"

Sidney hiccupped gently and sank into a chair. I was just opening my mouth to tell him to wipe the oil from his lips when the doorbell rang.

"Who's that?" Dave asked.

"I hope it's the junk man," I snapped, with a spiteful glance at Sidney. "Maybe we'll get something from our invention."

I WALKED to the door, opened it and a slim red-haired girl threw herself into my arms and flung her arms around my neck.

"Surprise," she cried. "Glad to see me?"

"Sis!" I yelled. "Of course I am." I held her at arm's length and took inventory. Slender rounded figure, eager youthful features and flaming red hair.

"You haven't changed a bit," I said, "except you're better looking. How come the visit? Did they throw you out of college?"

"Just a little vacation," she answered. "So I thought I'd blow in and see how the great quest was coming."

That kind of quieted me. She meant the robot of course.

"Come on in," I said drily, "and see for yourself."

She walked into the room and her cry of delight could be heard an even city block.

"Oh you did it," she cried happily. "I think he's just *wonderful!*"

I followed her into the room. She was regarding Sidney as if he were a six-foot pile of gold bullion.

"You know Dave," I said, "but you haven't lived till you've met Sidney." I motioned to Sidney. "Stand up, you lug. This is my sister, Nancy, a very nice little girl, so be on your best behavior."

"Oh I think he's too cute for words," Nancy cried. She walked over to Sidney and held out her hand. "I'm very pleased to meet you," she said primly. "I know we'll be great friends."

I watched Sidney curiously. He was

shuffling his feet awkwardly like a country bumpkin at his first dance. And then it occurred to me that Sidney had never seen a girl at such close range. Especially a girl like Nancy.

"Go ahead," I said. "Shake hands with her. She won't bite."

Sidney wiped his hand on the upholstery of the chair and then held it out as if he were sticking it into a buzz saw.

They shook hands and Nancy smiled up at him.

"I wonder if you'd do me a favor?" she said sweetly. "I left my grips outside on the porch. Would you take them upstairs, please?"

"Why — why sure," Sidney said hoarsely. "Why gosh yes, right away, thank you ma'am. I mean, you're welcome please." With a great deal more confusion he wheeled and ducked out of the room.

"Oh, he's darling," Nancy cried, as Sidney plowed up the steps with her grips. "I wish I had one just like him."

"No, you don't," I said.

In response to her surprised look, Dave and I explained the circumstances to her.

"Then," Nancy said thoughtfully, when we paused, "you've lost the equipment, and the lab goes next unless a miracle occurs."

"Right," I said. "We'll be back where we were ten years ago. Except, of course, we'll have Sidney. He'll be a big help I know."

NANCY bit her lip and we were silent until Sidney came charging back into the room with all the grace of an animated box car.

"Anything else, Miss Nancy?" he gulped.

Nancy looked thoughtfully at him and then suddenly she smiled and

crossed to the sofa and seated herself gracefully.

"Come here Sidney," she patted the pillow next to her invitingly. "I want to talk to you." She crossed her pretty legs and smiled charmingly at him.

"Well, gosh," Sidney bleated. "I don't know, I mean gosh."

I caught Nancy's wink and knew she was up to something.

"Go ahead, old man," I said. "Sit down and have a nice chat with Nancy. Dave and I'll get supper ready." I shoved him toward the sofa and grabbed Dave by the arm and pulled him out of the room.

"What's the idea?" Dave demanded, when we reached the kitchen.

"I don't know," I answered, "but Nancy's got something up her sleeve. Maybe she's going to appeal to his better nature."

Dave shook his head doubtfully.

"She can sing 'lips that touch liquor shall never touch mine,' but I doubt if it'll help. Sidney's beyond hope. He's incurable."

Which went to prove how little he knew about Sidney.

You wouldn't believe the change that came over him that night. When Nancy got through with him and brought him out to the kitchen he even looked different. As if he were shining with some new inner light.

He set the table. He passed the plates during supper. He dried the dishes. After supper he mowed the lawn, cleaned the basement, and cut about a cord of wood. To top off the entire amazing performance he went to bed sober for the first time in days.

Sidney had hit the sawdust trail and no fooling!

Dave and I were jubilant for the first time in months and we gave all credit to Nancy.

"You must have given him a power-

ful pep talk," I said, "because he's certainly a new man."

"You boys just didn't know how to handle him," she said smiling. "I told him if he was a real good boy today and tomorrow at the convention, I'd let him take me for a walk the next day. And he thought that was just fine."

"Well," I said, "I hope he stays on the wagon until after the convention. After that he can take up quarters in an oil refinery for all I care."

The next day started fine and I kept my fingers crossed. When I got up Sidney was down in the basement polishing himself on the buffing wheel. He helped Nancy pick up the breakfast dishes and then we all got in the car and started for the convention.

This was the day. This was the all-important day that Sidney would meet his all important test. I looked at him, riding in the back seat with Dave.

He was sniffing a violet.

I kept my fingers crossed.

FLASHLIGHT bulbs popped, reporters snapped questions and the throngs that gathered about the entrance to Convention Hall stared in wonder as Sidney made his entrance.

If I hadn't grabbed his arm and hustled him through the doors he would probably have spent the day there, bowing and scraping to the multitude like a politician.

Inside, I hurried Dave, Nancy, and Sidney down the hall to a room which had been assigned to us for the duration of the convention.

"The judges," I said to Sidney, "will want to examine you in a little while. Don't be alarmed at anything they do. They'll inspect you and probably ask you questions the rest of the day."

"Will they come down here?" Nancy asked.

"Nope," I said. "Sidney will have

to display himself in the exhibition gallery. A page will let us know when they're ready for him."

I had some people to see then so I left them and spent the rest of the time praying silently that Sidney would behave.

A half hour later I was sitting in the exhibit arena, clenching and unclenching my hands when Dave and Nancy found me.

"He's all set," Dave said. "He'll make his appearance any minute now."

"Fine," I said and hoped it would be. The stands were crowded with people and up in the special boxes I could see several of the judges leaning forward eagerly. Everyone was anxious to see the man of metal, as the papers had dubbed him. To see whether he was just a clever mechanical toy or whether he was what we claimed: a rational, thinking robot.

I swallowed nervously as the murmuring of the audience settled to an expectant hush. There was an electric tension in the air, as the judges, the assembled scientists, and the crowd waited expectantly for our brain child to appear.

I was so nervous and excited that I didn't feel the tap on my shoulder immediately. Not until it was repeated sharply, insistently, did I turn around.

An angry, dark little man in overalls was standing behind me.

"I'ma da janitor," the little man said heatedly. "I'ma—"

"Some other time," I cut in hurriedly. "I'm busy now. Please, see me later."

"I'ma wanta see you righta now," the janitor said emphatically. "Data beeg tin guy you make, he'sa steal my oil can. I'ma wanta know whosa gon pay me for my oil can?"

I heard a thunderous roar of applause. Sidney was being announced.

"Listen, Bud," I implored, "can't you see me tomorrow about this oil. I—" I stopped suddenly, a cold fist clenching over my stomach.

I grabbed the janitor by the throat.

"What did you say about oil?" I yelled.

"I'ma walk down the hall," the little man said angrily, "minda my own business, when dees beeg tin guy jumpa out and grab my oil can. 'Gotta hava bracer, gotta have a bracer' he yell and den he run like hell. Now whosa gon pay for my oil can?"

A cold sweat broke out on my forehead and trickled down my face. Sidney was off the wagon!

MY first wild thought was to somehow get to him, stop his appearance, but the next instant I knew I was too late.

To the wild roars of acclaim of the entire auditorium, Sidney walked onto the stage.

Staggered would be a better word.

My first despairing look convinced me that he was hopelessly oiled up. There was a strange belligerent roll to his walk and his mouth was parted slightly as if he were hoping to catch flies with it. From one corner of his stainless steel mouth a thin stream of oil had dribbled and splattered onto his aluminum chest.

"Oh," I groaned to Dave. "He ought to be at the Keeley Institute instead of up there."

Dave and Nancy looked helplessly at me and then back at Sidney, who by this time was weaving his way to the front of the stage. The audience craned their necks curiously as he stopped and peered foolishly about at the judges and scientists.

Then he hiccupped and staggered back a few paces.

I groaned as I listened to the in-

credulous murmur that arose from the spectators. The jig, I knew, was up.

I had a horrible vision of our fellowship and scientific standing vanishing forever into the mists of scorn and derision.

And then, if such a thing was possible, my horror increased.

Sidney was going to make a speech.

I closed my eyes and prayed as his metallic voice boomed clear through the hall.

"Ish jush a lota nonshense," he shouted. "Jush a lota damn nonshense. Jush to make a spectacle outa me, thash all it is." He wobbled around a few steps and seemed to calm down a trifle.

"Of coursh," he paused to hiccough, "of coursh if you jush want to look me over thash all right. But nobody's poking around in my stomach and that's final. Thash not scientific curiosity, thash jush damn noseynass."

The shocked gasp of the audience acted as a tonic to Sidney's ham-like instincts. His metal lips parted in a pleased smile and he bestowed a grateful glance upon the crowded arena.

"I'll buy a drink," he announced suddenly. "Thash what I'll do, buy a drink for the house. He staggered back from the edge of the stage. "Barteeendeerrr," he hawled at the top of his voice, "set 'em up for everybody."

THE audience was laughing now and I felt tears of humiliation stinging my eyes. Dave and I would be branded as charlatans and quacks from now on, no matter what we might accomplish.

As a man might watch his own execution, so I watched Sidney.

The laughter of the audience had evidently convinced him that he had a mission in life as an entertainer. With a coy smile he raised one clumsy foot

in the air and began the first movement of something that looked like a hideous cross between the black bottom and an Old World gavotte.

With an absurd smile spreading his lips he pranced and leaped about the stage, his three hundred pounds threatening to shatter the floor boards with every step. Finally the inevitable happened. He fell. Not just an ordinary fall, but a high arching dive that dumped his metallic carcass to the floor with a splintering, jangling crash.

The audience were standing in their seats as Sidney rolled over and straightened to a sitting position. He peered dazedly, but happily, at their amazed faces and then his mouth opened wide and his voice, thickened with liquor, soared over their heads.

For I'm a jolly good fellooooooow
oow—

Which nobody can deenyyy.

He ended the song with a noisy hiccough and then collapsed on his back, out cold. Sidney had passed out cold and as I listened to the shouts and laughter of my scientific brethren I realized that with him had passed my own dreams.

"I'll get him," I said wearily to Dave, "and meet you later." I added "Don't be so gloomy. After all Sidney's happy so why shouldn't we be?"

It took me a few minutes to edge my way through the milling crowd and by the time I clambered onto the stage I saw that several of the judges were standing over Sidney's recumbent figure.

It was a humiliating moment for me, but I was beyond caring very much. I elbowed them aside and grabbed one of Sidney's arms.

"Get up," I snapped, shaking him roughly. "On your feet, the show's over."

I felt a hand grip my arm then and I turned to meet the stern, piercing eyes of old Professor Norton, head of the New York research foundation. His first words were as shocking as a lead pipe on the skull.

"Congratulations, my boy," he boomed. "You've done it; captured the human element. Your robot has a sense of humor and humor is the element that separates man from beast. Funniest imitation of a drunk I've seen in years." He winked broadly at me. "If my vote will help, that fellowship's as good as yours this minute."

My mouth opened and closed foolishly. I struggled to make some sort of reply. But it was no use. The words just weren't there.

"Tell me," a white haired judge addressed me, "does this remarkable robot of yours think up his own imitations or do you help him. I swear his imitation seemed almost too realistic."

It was at that moment that Sidney chose to hiccough noisily. I whipped out a handkerchief and snorted into it.

"A little cold," I said feebly. "Must've picked it up at the hall."

A DOZEN terrible thoughts were chasing around in my head like frightened rabbits. The judges thought Sidney had been acting. If they found out differently, they certainly wouldn't grant me a fellowship to continue robot research. Imagine anyone in their right mind wanting more steel sots like Sidney roaming around loose!

Sidney was stirring restlessly and the judges watched him anxiously.

"Is everything all right?" Professor Norton asked suspiciously.

"Fine," I lied. "Just fine."

I had to get Sidney out of the way until he sobered up.

My heart hammered against my ribs with painful bangs. A wild idea had

just occurred to me.

"I think," said Professor Norton, "we should question your robot now."

"No, no," I stammered breathlessly. "He's all tuckered out. Almost in a state of collapse. Might bring on a nervous breakdown. He needs a week to recuperate, at least."

"From what?" Norton asked bluntly.

"Just last night," I replied desperately. "Sidney had to take out his own appendix. Have any of you gentlemen ever gone through that experience? I can assure you if you haven't that it's quite trying."

Professor Norton coughed embarrassedly.

"Of course old man," he said brusquely. "I didn't know."

"Then a week from now," I said quickly, "at my laboratory. You can examine Sidney thoroughly at that time."

Professor Norton frowned.

"That is satisfactory," he said slowly, "but your robot acts just as if he's passed out completely. Why doesn't he show some life?"

"He'll show some life," I promised. If my wild idea worked he'd show plenty of life. I stooped over and shook Sidney.

"Quick," I hissed in his ear, "run for your life, they're coming after you. The pink can openers are coming. Thousands of them. *Hurry!*"

Sidney's eyes opened. He peered foggily at me for an instant and then with a wild cry he clambered to his feet. He glared hysterically about him.

"My God," he yelled, "they're everywhere." With another tinny scream, he charged off the stage and disappeared down the corridor with a tremendous clatter.

"Well!" gasped Professor Norton.

"He's like that," I said weakly. "Abrupt."

I tried to get away but they plied me with questions about Sidney and it was several minutes before I could tear myself away. Then I looked for Sidney. In the halls, in our room, and with increasing worry, through the exhibit room, through the entire building. But it was no use.

Sidney had vanished.

IF you follow the papers at all you probably remember the rest of the story. Sidney had disappeared and the tabloids made quite a fuss about it. Dave and I hunted high and low for him and in our spare time, built another robot.

With Sidney as a lesson in what to avoid, we constructed a robot that was useful, efficient, productive and, in my opinion, about the most boring and uninteresting creature that ever existed.

But the judges liked him and, with many speeches and huzzahs, Dave and I were awarded the muchly coveted fellowship.

In spite of the acclaim of our scientific brethren everything seemed kind of flat. Nancy went back to college and a week or so later Dave looked across the room at our new robot—we called him number one—and said disgustedly:

"He's perfect, but who the hell wants to be surrounded by dull perfection. I wouldn't swap Sidney for a thousand like that. He was screwy and silly and unpredictable—and human. I miss the big lug."

So did I. A week dragged by and then one day I was driving across town and a tire blew out. Cursing under my breath I climbed out of the car and looked around for a service station.

Luck was against me. There was nothing but a junk yard in the block and that was on the other side of the street. I started to walk when sud-

denly I saw something that knocked the air out of my lungs with a whoosh and started my heart pounding with dizzy excitement.

I should have said I saw *someone* because it was Sidney.

He was lounged comfortably in the driver seat of an old model T that was parked in front of the junk yard. A battered top hat was set at a rakish angle on his metal dome and one leg was draped loosely over the side of the car. He was so crusted with rust that he probably couldn't move if he wanted.

"Sidney," I yelled excitedly. "Sidney!" I dodged through the traffic and raced to the side of the car. "Sidney," I yelled again, "it's me."

Sidney's eyelids were closed and I couldn't tell whether he heard me or not.

"What d'ya want, bud?" a thick, suspicious voice sounded behind me.

I LOOKED around. A heavy set man in overalls was standing in front of a shack built on the edge of the junkyard. He wiped his hands on a piece of cheesecloth and walked toward me. I noticed he was watching me rather curiously.

"I just paused to look at this—this," I paused and waved a hand at the car, "at this advertising stunt. Very clever."

The proprietor's lips parted in a pleased grin.

"Do you think so?" he asked contentedly. "Some kids brought dat tin dummy in here a few days ago. Dey found it in an alley. I buys it for a half a buck and stick it out here. Kinda gives a tony air to the joint. Gets a lotta attention."

I looked at Sidney closely for the first time. There was an almost beatific look of contentment on his

rusty face. Sprawled on the cushions, uselessly idle, he was in his glory.

"It's gettin' kinda rusty," the junk dealer said, "so I'm going to oil it up this aftanoon."

I smiled.

"Do that," I said, "and remember—use nice thin oil."

I knew then that I was not going to disturb Sidney. He had found the never-never land his simple soul had yearned for. Nothing to do but rest, someone to keep him pleasantly oiled up and enough attention from passers-by to gratify his exhibitionist nature.

It was Valhalla for him and it would take someone far more heartless than yours truly to destroy his paradise.

"So long," I murmured and as I turned I noticed something that brought a quick smile to my lips.

Walking away I thought of it.

It might have been an optical illusion—but I preferred to think it wasn't.

For Sidney had winked at me. As I had turned to leave one of his metal eyelids had fluttered slyly. A gesture, I knew, that bade me a happy, comradely farewell.

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